

**GARVIN ROBERT GILBERT:
AN ACCOUNT OF HIS LIFE AND WORK**

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts in English
in the University of Canterbury
by
Jasmin Brandt

University of Canterbury
New Zealand
2002

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my parents for making it possible
for me to write this thesis in New Zealand.

Thanks to my friends for your ongoing
encouragement and moral support.

Thanks to Patrick Evans for being the expert
that you are, and sharing your knowledge generously.

Thanks to the Gilbert family for donating the
unpublished material to the Macmillan Brown
Archives, thus ensuring its preservation.

Contents

ABSTRACT.....	1
PREFACE.....	2
CHAPTER 1: THE NEW ZEALAND LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE 1930S AND 1940S.....	8
CHAPTER 2: GILBERT PUBLISHED.....	32
CHAPTER 3: GILBERT UNPUBLISHED.....	63
CHAPTER 4: GILBERT SELF-PUBLISHED.....	82
CONCLUSION.....	93
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	96
UNPUBLISHED WORKS.....	99

Abstract.

This thesis examines the writing of Garvin Robert Gilbert (1915-1992) following the candidate's retrieval of a large amount of unpublished material from the writer's deceased estate in 1999 and interviewing of his widow, Joy Gilbert. Some account of this process is given in the introduction. The purposes of the thesis are to construct an account, hitherto unavailable, of the sequence and formative events of Gilbert's life and particularly of the connexions between the phases of that life and the phases of his writing, to assess the degree and nature of his relationship to Frank Sargeson, a friend and mentor of Gilbert in his earlier years and someone generally accepted to have influenced the way he wrote in the early postwar period, to trace any links that exist between his published and his unpublished writing, and between his writing as a whole and the work of those of his contemporaries who provide a meaningful context for him, as well as to give reasons for Gilbert's consistent failure to find professional publication in his rather forlorn "second career", 1980-94. The first chapter gives an account of the literary background of the early period of cultural nationalism in New Zealand in which Gilbert first moved from being what he called a "reading" man to a "writing" man, and emphasizes particularly the realism that appears to have been a given of the period. The second chapter examines the professionally published work of his earlier years, *Free to Laugh and Dance* (Caxton, 1942), *Glass-Sharp and Poisonous* (Caxton, 1952), and *Love in a Lighthouse* (Pegasus, 1956). Chapter Three looks at the unpublished work of the first period of his retirement, particularly the post-nuclear thriller "The Descent into Silence", his vast, idiosyncratic novel "Energy Island", and his autobiography. Chapter Four examines the material Gilbert published himself during the last nine years of his life under the imprint "Dean Farran Printproductions", his own vanity press. It is argued, finally, that a study of Gilbert is most valuable for the context it gives to New Zealand fiction of the two significant periods of New Zealand literature in which he wrote.

Introduction

Some books are undeservedly forgotten; none are undeservedly remembered.

W.H. Auden¹

Garvin Robert Gilbert is one of the near-forgotten authors of New Zealand literature. In critical works he gets mentioned in passing as one of the "sons of Sargeson" (Wevers 270), implying that the work he contributed is heavily influenced by Frank Sargeson, thus derivative and not original. None of his works have been subject to close analysis, and it is my intention to demonstrate that a discussion of his work is worthwhile because he did indeed seek new and unconventional ways to express his dissatisfaction with the New Zealand puritan society around him. While his first publication, *Free to Laugh and Dance* (1942) does indeed indicate a direct influence of Sargeson in his style and subject matter, his second publication, a novella entitled *Glass-sharp and Poisonous* (1952) shows a move away from Sargeson in that the social realist mode is replaced by allegory. My analysis shows that choosing the allegorical mode for his novella was an appropriate tool with which to express his critical views about New Zealand in a highly literary form of art—an effort that was lost on the New Zealand reading public.

Gilbert is one of those artists who, like Sargeson, decided to stay in New Zealand after the Second World War despite the fact that it was a hostile environment for creative minds. The reasons for this hostility are to be found in the cultural and historical context of the time. New Zealand was a country with a strong background of pioneer immigrants whose mission was to domesticate the New Zealand wilderness. The determination to tame and control the land was reflected in people's conservative attitudes, expressed through puritanism, and led to a cultural homogeneity that thwarted artistic freedom. A number of writers persevered, however, and Gilbert must be given credit for being one of them.

Gilbert's broken literary career sheds new light on the extent to which the New Zealand culture was inhibiting to creative minds, and on the lengths individuals such as Gilbert had to go in order to follow their artistic vocation. After the Second World War Gilbert lived in

¹ Auriel Douglas and Michael Strumpf. *Webster's New World Dictionary of Quotations*. New York: Macmillan, 1998. 69

Arrowtown as a full-time writer (1948-52), but after long delays in getting his work published, he rejoined the workforce to provide his family with financial security. It was not until the 1980s, when Gilbert retired, that he returned to being a full-time writer, which he remained until his death in 1994. The story of G. R. Gilbert is indicative of a number of New Zealand literary figures who, due to cultural milieu, did not live up to their full potential. As Lawrence Jones points out, "the foreshortened and broken careers of most of the novelists testify to the difficulties in becoming 'established'" (Jones 1998a: 152).

The critical analysis of recent years reconstructs the many beginnings of New Zealand literature by assigning different writers and critics their roles in this process of trying to establish a distinct New Zealand literature. This thesis about Gilbert and his writing is my contribution to the discussion of the 1930s and 1940s. Even if his is but a minor role, knowing about it makes the overall picture more nearly complete. Gilbert's story, alongside those of a number of other writers, shows that the country's literary beginnings were slow, not so much because of lack of talent, but because of the stifling cultural setting.

My interest in G. R. Gilbert awoke in 1999 during my BA Honours year. During the course of John Newton's paper "From Reading to Research" we discussed Charles Brasch's poem "The Estate" (1957). This poem reflects Brasch's view on the development of New Zealand literature at the time, and consequently, how Gilbert fits into the picture.

I think of your generation as the youngest
 That has found itself, has seen its way in the shadows
 Of this disconsolate age, this country indifferent
 To all but the common round, hostile to every
 Personal light men would live by. You may not be many,
 You that have groped through the stifling dust of existence
 And found water – you, shall I say, of the promise.
 Scattered, one here and one there, the length of these islands;
 To yourselves fumbling, fallible, often bewildered,
 Oftener discouraged, your lives strewn with disorder,
 And weak, and alone; yet to me as to others the lanterns
 We look to, certain stars in a cloudy twilight,
 More precious because of your weakness, because you stand single. (Brasch 38)

This extract gives a strong sense of the prevailing feeling amongst the writers of the period that there was a new era that had started after the Second World War - that there was a true New Zealand literature emerging, a literature distinct from that of Great Britain. Brasch is addressing this new generation of artists and with it encouraging them to persevere with their

efforts, despite the difficulties imposed upon them by the homogeneous society. The lines above refer to the difficulties artists encountered in New Zealand, particularly to the problems caused by the puritan mindset of the time that actively opposed difference and individuality. Being an intellectual meant being an outcast in a society obsessed with agrarianism and making money. Brasch, however, points out that standing single, the Man Alone motif, is what makes these artists precious. After this general introduction to the stanza, Brasch goes on to praise a number of artists for what they have achieved. G. R. Gilbert and his wife Joy are alluded to in the following extract:

They too who are planting
 Deep in desert Otago Athenian olive,
 Virgilian vine, pledges perhaps of a future
 Milder and sweeter to mellow blunt hard natures
 Of farmer and rabbit, driver, storekeeper, orchardman,
 With usage of wine and oil from grove and vineyard
 Shading stony terraced naked gorges
 Scourged now by frost and fire, no human country. (Brasch 38)

While Brasch does not refer to Gilbert's writing here, he still saw him and Joy as two of these "stars in a cloudy twilight", the symbols of hope for the better times to come.

My curiosity about G. R. Gilbert was increased when I found out that while it appeared that he had given up writing completely in the 1950s, the publication of some little booklets in the 1980s seemed to suggest otherwise. In 1985 a 10-page extract from a novel entitled "Energy Island" appeared in Volume 4 of the literary magazine *Untold*. While "Energy Island" remained unpublished as a whole, a booklet called *The Dramatis Personae of Gilbert's Novel Entitled "Energy Island"* was published in 1986. As I later discovered, Gilbert had published this booklet himself, using the pseudonym "Sary Hooptide". The aim seems to have been to create an interest in his unpublished *magnus opus* by introducing each of the 130 characters which feature in the novel. The introduction is written in a humorous way, raising questions such as whether Gilbert was still alive or indeed just "a media make-up" (Hooptide 5) and whether "such a considerable exercise in creativity [could possibly] have been the unaided work of a 68-year-old National Superannuitant" (Hooptide 5). Hooptide, alias Gilbert, suggests that maybe the novel was "written by a committee or a computer" (Hooptide 6).

This seemed to suggest that Gilbert had gone back to writing, and with the intention of finding confirmation and evidence I arranged an interview with Gilbert's widow, Joy, in July 1999.

Not only did I want to find out whether Gilbert's supposedly 500,000 word long novel "Energy Island" really existed and had been finished, I also wanted to see whether Joy could share some of her memories from their time in Auckland in the 1940s with me. In Michael King's biography of Frank Sargeson, *Frank Sargeson: A Life*. Auckland: Penguin, 1995, I had found several references to Bob Gilbert which described him as a friend and protégé of Sargeson. I was hoping to get some kind of account of what it had been like to be so closely involved with the writing scene surrounding Sargeson in Auckland. As we have already seen in Brasch's poem, there was the sense that a new, localised, truly New Zealand literature was being established. Sargeson was supposedly one of the dominant figures in this group of new writers, starting a tradition of masculine, realist and nationalist writing. I was curious to hear how closely aligned Gilbert was with these writers.

Unfortunately though, Joy's recollections of forty-five years ago were quite sketchy. However, Joy confirmed that "Frank Sargeson was Bob's mentor" (interview 9 July 1999, unpaginated) and that there often were meetings at Sargeson's home in Esmonde Street, Auckland:

... we used to drink pots and pots of coffee and sit on the floor and discuss things ... Now, [while] I liked Frank ... and all the crowd that were there, I felt they were literary snobs ... Everything had to be drawn out and talked about this way, that way. They couldn't blinking well get on with living. They were all so busy talking about this and that ... So I used to just sit back and listen because they were all the literary people, ... Bob included. And I was thinking: This isn't life, this is wrong. Because all they did was talk, and write ... I liked them, but literary people are super-sensitive ... they never get anywhere ... And I could feel Bob getting deeper and deeper into this, and I never grizzled or was against it, but we discussed it ... I remember out at Brown's Bay there was Anna Kavan, and [she and] Greville [Texidor] were talking. ... And I can remember her talking to the other and she was saying to Greville: "Have you ever had the death-wish?" You know, they go away, they go too deep. And I could see: this was dangerous. We were going to be caught up with this. And we [Joy and Garvin] both talked about it. And we said: "Well, it's not really life, practical life." ... And so we in the end, and this was after the lighthouse business, we packed up, and he lost his job, of course, with the broadcasting, and we tramped through New Zealand, right through New Zealand ... We did that for three months, and we tramped right down and we found little golden Arrowtown. Oh it was beautiful! And we were the first outsiders in Arrowtown. And then we decided to build a house out of sun-dried brick ... Bob then [while living in Arrowtown] did writing full-time ... Writing is not a thing that makes money ... It wasn't any good, so he became a store keeper's assistant. He was bloody well awful at it. He was so dreamy! (Interview with Joy Gilbert, 9 July 1999, unpaginated)

The above is Joy's condensed version of her memories of the 1940s. From the interview it becomes clear that Joy had a different perspective on those meetings than the literary people

she was surrounded by. Her emphasis was not literary but on the practical human side, and what she was concerned about was, on the one hand, that their intellectual work brought with it financial insecurity, and on the other, that the frustration of struggling with society coupled with the writers' "super-sensitivity", as Joy called it, could lead to suicidal tendencies, as is illustrated by her comment on the discussion of Anna Kavan and Greville Texidor about the "death-wish" - the danger of which Joy saw confirmed by the fact that Texidor did kill herself.

Equally non-literary are Joy's comments about John Reece Cole, James K. Baxter and Denis Glover and Anton Vogt. While she describes them as very nice people they all cheated on their wives by having girl-friends and not taking the responsibilities for their wives and children seriously, as in the case of Baxter who abandoned his wife and six children in Arrowtown, where Joy helped them out by providing them with vegetables from their garden.

Joy's remarks about how Frank Sargeson treated the women in the group were not too positive as the following extract from the interview shows:

And they'd have heaps of arguments! . . . And Frank was a fair devil! Whatever a person said, he'd always niggle them on a little bit all the time. There were parts of Frank I didn't like . . . They would say deeply philosophical things and then he'd question them a little bit, as if to make them prove what they were saying . . . I think he was being very naughty. But that was his way, he was drawing them out, of course. But, I didn't think it got anywhere. In the end the woman would . . . get terribly heated and start bursting out crying . . . and Frank would think he'd won. He was very difficult like that. (Interview with Joy Gilbert, 9 July 1999)

After this initial interview Joy Gilbert's health deteriorated and no further interviews were possible. However, I was allowed to come back and freely examine Gilbert's writing room out in the garage of their property in Lincoln, and his library in the garden shed. Both rooms contained quite a large number of manuscripts, old and new. As Joy proudly pointed out to me: "This [house] wasn't always like this . . . It was just a funny little four-room cottage. And he [Garvin] did all of this himself. So he was a man of many talents" (Interview 9 July 1999).

Since Joy Gilbert's health was not getting better, the finding of Gilbert's manuscripts made me shift the emphasis of my work to the written material that G. R. Gilbert had left behind. Joy and I discussed what was to become of all the material, and she was more than happy about the suggestion to shift everything to the Macmillan Brown Archives, as that ensured that nothing would be thrown out after her death. In January 2000 I moved all of Gilbert's written

material, containing manuscripts, home-produced soft-bound booklets, some hard-bound copies and letters and paper clippings from Lincoln into the Macmillan Brown Archives, where they are now contained in some fifteen boxes. My efforts to investigate G. R. Gilbert were carried out just in time, since Joy Gilbert died in April 2000.

The emphasis of this thesis is therefore twofold: in the first part I situate Gilbert in the New Zealand context of the 1930s and 1940s, pointing out the difficulties writers were confronted with in a puritan society, and how this affected their writing, as they tried to use it as a means of expressing their criticism of society and establish the basis for a New Zealand literary tradition in the process. While the analysis of Gilbert's first two publications firmly situates him in the anti-puritan, realist group of writers, it also illustrates that he deserves to be accorded more credit for originality than has been the case. The focus in the second part of the thesis lies on illuminating Gilbert's largely unnoticed attempt in the 1980s and 1990s to re-emerge as a writer. The research on Gilbert I conducted in 1999 has enabled me to shed light not only on Gilbert's biographical details as to what he did with his life after abandoning his dream of being an established full-time writer in the 1950s, it has also resulted in the preservation of Gilbert's unpublished work. Having thus gathered the evidence that Gilbert is the author of various works published through his own vanity press, I can trace and explore the myth Gilbert sought to create about himself in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Chapter 1

The New Zealand Literary Context of the 1930s and 1940s

The thirties released - or tapped - a spring. (Curnow 1960:50)

This epigraph is suitable in setting the New Zealand scene of the 1930s and 1940s because it implies the central notion of the new young writers who emerged in this period: that they represented the growth of something new and promising, something hitherto unknown to New Zealand, a distinct and distinctly New Zealand literature. Before assessing what it was that shaped the writing of this time, it is necessary to point out the illusory nature of such a claim. Literature of some sort or another had been written ever since European New Zealand came into being with the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, and from about the Jubilee of 1890 writers increasingly tended to consider themselves to be local in the sense of being in a particular and distinctive place. The sense of time and place has continued, particularly once the culture developed sufficiently to evolve a literary-critical perspective. In this perspective the kind of attitude we probably associate more with Curnow than anyone else, the notion that the arrival of his generation marked a beginning where there had been nothing before, can be seen as part of the culture's development, a necessary delusion that moved literature on from its colonial phase but which involved in itself a distinctive provincialism that tended to look at the present as if there had been no past. This explains why the 1930s were considered as the beginnings of a tradition by the people who set out to create such a tradition; for them what had happened before them genuinely had no importance, no valid existence.

Provincialism

New Zealand society of the 1930s has been defined by its trenchantly provincial nature. Lawrence Jones dates the provincial period as predominantly affecting the country between the years 1935 and 1964 (Jones 1998a: 150). Provincialism expressed itself through a hostile attitude towards difference and creativity, which were seen as a threat to the utopian society

being attempted. Provincialism encouraged conformity, insularity, and a lack of engagement with critical thinking.

In order to understand the hostility artists and writers were facing during this time, it is essential to understand the meaning of provincialism. The term here does not refer to a certain exterior concept such as belonging to a particular region – denoting this or that place in the world - but rather to a particular set of attitudes to the world that can be found anywhere. Under its spell, the world is seen not as a place signified through difference and diversity, but as a place signified through sameness and uniformity. Not only is this sameness accepted by the provincial mind as given and natural, it is seen a state to be desired. As a result of such an attitude, provincial societies demand conformity, and punish anyone seen as not capable of fitting in with the required norms or willing to do so. As Peter Simpson has pointed out:

Isolated by his minority tastes and interests the provincial tends to sympathize and identify with others on the periphery of society - the disaffected, the nonconformists, the deviants, the foreigners, the loners and losers. Provincial fiction . . . typically focuses on the conflict between the isolated individual and society, which is seen as homogeneous, dull, conformist, philistine, puritanical, bourgeois, materialist, Anglo-Saxon and hostile. (Simpson 59)

Simpson distinguishes between provincial and post-provincial writers; the latter stood out through their acceptance of belonging to the "new world". This, according to him, "result[ed] in a changed and potentially more creative relationship with . . . society" (59).

Patrick Evans has elaborated on New Zealand provincialism in his three *Landfall* articles entitled "The Provincial Dilemma". The central focus lies on how New Zealand writers tackled this dilemma, which Evans defines as "[the] problem of leaping the gap between province and world" (March 1976: 35). The challenge for writers was not merely to stand up for their differing moral beliefs, but to overcome the limitations of the provincial novel, which Evans describes as being "a closed system" (Evans March 1976: 35). To break out of this system the writer, according to Evans, has to go beyond it by "steadily [revolving] within the provincial experience, seeking its warts and moles for the substance of its fiction", which places the writer into the category of being writer-critic; or alternatively, the writer has to decide "whether to become a regional novelist (by stating universal truths about local things) [or] a cosmopolitan novelist (by setting his novels in the world beyond the provincial dream)" (Evans March 1976: 35).

Probably the most specific analysis of provincialism and the related concept of regionalism was made by the American poet, Allen Tate, in his essay "The New Provincialism" (1945). Although there is no direct evidence, it seems likely that this essay was read by New Zealand poets at that time, and its thought was certainly applied to the period by one of them, Kendrick Smithyman, in a 1961 essay in which he linked New Zealand writing with what Tate had to say about the American Southern states. The latter, in Tate's view, were suffering from an increasing dominance by the burgeoning industrial Northern states, a dominance that was both economically and culturally threatening to what he saw as the regional integrity of the South. His essay, in part, discusses the effects of these threats on the literature of the South, and promulgates his crucial distinction between regionalism and provincialism:

. . . regionalism is that consciousness or that habit of men in a given locality which influences them to certain patterns of thought and conduct handed to them by their ancestors. Regionalism is thus limited in space but not in time.

The provincial attitude is limited in time but not in space. When the regional man, in his ignorance, often an intensive and creative ignorance, of the world, extends his own immediate necessities into the world, and assumes that the present moment is unique, he becomes the provincial man . . . (Tate 286)

Provincialism, in this view, is an error, a deviation from a true and proper relationship with the time and place in which one lives, from the world immediately around one. Without a past, the provincial has no sense of belonging, and believes instead in a utopian, even narcissistic, vision.

Smithyman, looking back on New Zealand poetry of the 1940s and 1950s in the essays which were to become *A Way of Saying* (1965), saw something of the same influence that Tate saw, of a burgeoning Northern economy and culture, and the applicability of Tate's prescription to the poetic of the time as a corrective to it. Patrick Evans has argued further, that Tate's article sets out a particular kind or degree of provincialism which in particular afflicted the writing of Allen Curnow during the period and from which Tate's own article itself is not proof. He suggests that the intensity and drama of the war period led to a grandiosity that can be seen in the language of both men. He cites Tate's own article against him ("That renaissance is over; or at any rate that period is over; and I write, we all write, in the time of the greatest war" [Tate 283]), and points to poems like "The Unhistoric Story", "Time", "Time and the Child" and "Dialogue of Island and Time" from Curnow's 1941 volume and "Landfall in Unknown Seas" from a couple of years later as showing a similar rhetorical grandiosity located in the drama of the period and explained, in

this argument, as a compensation for the poet's isolation from the world in which the dramatic events of the period took place (see Evans, "'A very emotional person as well': Allen Curnow, 1911-2001". *Landfall* 203 [May, 2002], 9-21).

In this particular period of our history, provincialism clearly seemed to involve a detachment from larger realities and a belief in one's local environment as discrete and distinctive in identity. This belief is behind the "South Island Myth" and the domination of New Zealand writing, as demonstrated by John Newton, with an imagery associated with isolation, emptiness, and primarily masculine achievement - an imagery that became the basis of a mode of cultural nationalism. Implicit in this myth is the same assumption of social and cultural homogeneity that we find in the provincial attitude: the one is a fleshing-out of the other.

Puritanism

If provincialism was fleshed out by the "South Island myth", it had already been fattened up by the puritanism which arrived in this country as part of "the cultural baggage" of European immigrants to New Zealand in the nineteenth century. The phrase is Kirstine Moffat's in her study of puritanism and New Zealand fiction (13), in which she emphasises that, in the New Zealand experience, a definite distinction has to be made between the two versions of puritanism, the theological and the secular. The former, she states, was introduced by Protestant missionaries and through the establishment of religious settlements, and while seen in the newly established communities that evolved in the European colony as an important indication of people's respectability, never had sufficient status as to turn people into regular churchgoers. What was generally taken from theological puritanism was what was most conducive to secularisation, those moralistic attitudes towards people's social conduct that praised the virtues of industry, abstinence from alcohol and suppression of sexuality – generally, anything from which pleasure could be derived. The most prominent trait associated with puritan principles was that of the work ethic: "'Work, deny yourself and you will be prosperous and saved' presided as a motto over the cracking of the spine of the bush", according to Robert Chapman in "Fiction and the Social Pattern", his account of the impact of secular puritanism on New Zealand literature (36). "God was taken out of the equation" (Moffat 16) and people tended to conform to puritan standards simply because these had been unquestioningly passed on to them from prior generations.

Frank Sargeson was famously one of secular puritanism's most famous victims and opponents, breaking free with great difficulty from a stifling Methodist background in Hamilton to find creative and sexual freedom of a sort. As he put it:

. . . whether or not you have ever set foot in any church in your life, just doesn't affect the matter at all. You don't escape little Bethel-its ramifications are infinitely more far-reaching than those of any Gestapo, and perhaps those who imagine they escape them do so least of all. (Sargeson 47f)

This secular development allowed for a certain level of hypocrisy within society. Because people's behaviour no longer evolved from religious beliefs of right and wrong - thus losing the notion that it was one's religious duty to live in a certain way - social conduct became a matter of keeping up appearances in the name of respectability. Sargeson illustrated the hypocritical nature of New Zealand society with an anecdote in which he talked about a painter who was fined for working on a Sunday, something then illegal in this country. From the painter's point of view Sunday was the best day for the job, as on that day the shop in which he was painting was quiet and without customers. Of course, the painter would have had similar ideal circumstances had he opted to work on a Saturday, but the man probably went to the pub instead, as Sargeson suggests. "At least one Church sermon was creditably preached on the moral iniquity of the conviction, but, generally speaking, public indignation was not very violent" (Sargeson 98). The hypocrisy lies in the contradiction that while the law that prohibited work on a Sunday was based on the Christian belief that Sunday should be a day of worship, it is the law and not the church which pursues the matter in court. Ironically, the church was not overly concerned about someone breaking this rule-in fact, it even condemned the conviction in this case - and the public was not particularly concerned, either.

The hypocritical nature of the puritan mindset posed a harsh reality for local artists. In particular, the importance accorded the work ethic in puritan New Zealand society took its toll, forcing artists into the role of social outcasts. Peter J. Gibbons writes that the majority of New Zealanders at the time belonged to the lower middle-class and

believed that work produced profit and hard work produced greater profit. Conversely they held in contempt those who did not work hard or appeared not to work at all. (Gibbons 312)

This attitude especially affected artists, who even today run the risk of being regarded as being idle and dependent, an attitude that has its roots in the fact that those who create usually

have no regular, steady income. This attitude also made a very clear delineation between intellectual work and physical or manual labour: art was regarded as frivolous indulgence.

The puritan network was well established in New Zealand, and thus hard to escape from: the country consisted mainly of small townships in which the lower middle-class had created a framework of social, sectarian, cultural and recreational organisations that were designed to promote their social attitudes. The state education system was also in the hands of the lower middle-class, who "preferred the inculcation of basic literacy and vocational skills to heightened aesthetic sensibility" (Gibbons 317). All in all, as Gibbons sums it up, "the cultural homogeneity of New Zealand was dispiriting and dulling" (317).

The only means to escape the oppressive system was to go overseas. The most prominent example of a literary expatriate is Katherine Mansfield, who "became a symbol of the promise which could be fulfilled in the old world" (Gibbons 322). All the more credit has to be given, then, to the artists who chose to return and those who never left in the first place. Leaving New Zealand for good might have eliminated the problems for the person leaving, but New Zealand would not have been better off for it, even though, as Gibbons effectively puts it, "the writers who chose to remain in New Zealand had to find a way of dealing with "the age of the cow-cookies [. . .] who were busy] conquering the wilderness" (Gibbons 320). Considering the obstacles posed by a less than encouraging publishing environment and local readership, the choice to be a full-time writer in New Zealand was made by few, as it involved a conscious sacrifice of one's standard of living and social standing:

The temporary place on the outside [was] retained by working at other jobs and accepting the fact that writing here must be virtually unpaid, be for a small audience, and carry few perquisites of recognition and prestige. But there the writers are on the outside, clinging to the net which encloses a balloon, unable to live in the gas-filled interior, but in a fine though precarious position to see where the balloon is going and to tell from the whiffs of escaping gas how things are in the interior. (Chapman 31)

The role of the artist in these times was primarily that of a critic exposing the wrongs of society. Points of attack during the 1930s and 1940s were often the negative effects of puritanism on the individual in society. The Depression, ironically, provided a welcome relief for writers, as the resulting hardships that crippled New Zealand disrupted people's sense of security: unemployment suddenly affected, no longer a minority, but increasingly the majority of New Zealanders, amongst whom discontent with the situation and sentiments about the

unsatisfactory handling of the situation grew:

It took time for misery and misgovernment to shake people out of their accustomed patterns of thought and action. . . Yet it was not simply or even primarily misery that angered and ultimately radicalised so many people as the way the ruling classes institutionalized misery. . . . Inhabitants of the work-camps learned to hate the governing classes who sentenced them to such misery. (Gibbons 327)

The enlarging of a discontented public meant that writers actually found a chance to have their criticism of society favourably received. Writers wanted to promote social change, and now New Zealanders seemed ripe for change. Robert Chapman, while on the one hand saying that "so homogeneous and hence so insistently demanding was the [social] pattern that in order to see it, in order to write about it, it was necessary to escape outside and often away from it" (31), on the other hand describes the social changes brought about by the Depression as an alternative to seeking creative exile overseas. The Depression and the Second World War "shook [writers] outside the pattern and made a temporary place on the outside" (Chapman 31). This observation of Chapman's is confirmed by Gilbert's unpublished article "I remember, I remember" (1984), in which he describes how the Depression and the War affected his life by shaking him out of established patterns.

The Great Depression not only affected New Zealand on an economic level, it transformed the hegemonic superstructure. Up to this point in time, New Zealand valued its close links with the British motherland, as Gibbons shows from what pupils were taught at school:

'In the first place', pupils in Standard 6 were able to read, the good citizen 'is proud to be a citizen of the British Empire, and in the second he is proud to be a citizen of New Zealand'. (Gibbons 326)

Being a New Zealander was thus defined in indirect terms, through its subordinate position to Britain. W. David McIntyre points out in his article "Imperialism and Nationalism" that this attitude was maintained until the 1930s, and the result was that questions about a distinct New Zealand identity did not arise before then. "New Zealand remained a loyal outpost of empire.... Content to be Britain's outlying farm, New Zealand eschewed the trappings of nationhood.." (McIntyre 346) When, during the Depression, Britain failed to give New Zealand the support this country was hoping for, attitudes started to change and unquestioned identification with Britain diminished.

So on the one hand the Depression triggered discontent with Britain by making New Zealanders feel abandoned, and on the other hand discontent with the local government arose because the government did not have a solution for the crisis at hand either. The Depression thus provided an opportunity that invited criticism of the current system. Allen Curnow picked up on these changes and vocalised them in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*. The social and political changes brought about by the Depression had a vital impact on New Zealand's sense of self and the establishment of an identity as an independent nation:

The economic stresses of the thirties forced the New Zealanders to look to themselves [rather than to the 'mother country'], and when they looked outward on the world again, it was with altered vision. (Curnow 1960: 48)

This "altered vision" was the rising need to make a break from the old ways of being closely connected with and dependent on Britain. This expressed itself through an emerging cultural nationalism and went hand in hand with the myth of beginnings mentioned earlier. However, a country's culture is difficult to develop artificially and by force, and it is certainly not something accomplished overnight. It took time for acknowledgement to be followed by actions, such as through the government, which staged "[t]he Centennial Celebrations of 1940 [that] sought to address the lack of a national culture" (Williams 710). The beginning aimed for in the 1940s was breaking the ship loose from the dock and getting it to sail the seas independently and without intent to return - however, this journey to freedom through independence was to take a lot longer than the writers who actively promoted such a change were anticipating, and was to involve different and surprising destinations.

The role of the writer in the 1930s and 1940s in the context of the economic crisis increasingly became one of active critic. Often the critical focus lay on puritanism, as this was identified as the element of society that the authors regarded as the major contributing factor to the current situation. Despite this trend towards social criticism, there were still writers who continued to produce puritan novels, as Kirstine Moffat has pointed out:

For those of a Puritan persuasion, such as Thornton, Evans and Foston, the Protestant denominations embody religious truth. Puritan theology, in their view, offers redemption, peace, and joy. It is liberating, freeing the individual from the bondage of sin and guilt. (Moffat 404)

Such puritan writers, however, contributed nothing new to New Zealand literature, in that their work sought to maintain and consolidate the existing puritan values, rather than acknowledge the obvious failure of their utopian vision which had already taken place. It is the other half of the "Puritan dichotomy" that plays a more important role in New Zealand literature, as it promoted change rather than stagnation.

The reverse side of this outlook is revealed in the writing of Bolitho, Lee, Clyde, Mander, Chamier, and Satchell. These authors regard Puritan doctrine as a cage which constricts the individual, stunting development and enforcing conformity. . . . Liberating yet confining, relevant yet out-dated, truth for some and superstition for others-the Puritan dichotomy is particularly apparent in these conflicting views of Puritan theology. (Moffat 404)

Puritanism thus meant freedom to the neo-puritan who had maintained religious faith, while the critical non-believer saw puritanism as the very means that inhibited his or her personal freedom. This dichotomy is reflected in Bill Pearson's article "Fretful Sleepers", his early postwar diatribe against the narrowness of New Zealand:

So there is an aching need for art in our country. . . . we need an art to expose ourselves to ourselves, explain ourselves to ourselves, see ourselves in a perspective of place and time. But the New Zealander would shy from it because he is afraid to recognize himself. . . . No artist can work without an audience willing to co-operate: if he is to be honest his audience must be honest; they must be prepared to speculate about themselves. (Pearson 12)

This shows that Pearson associated puritanism with restriction and believed that the role of the artist is to encourage critical reflection of oneself and society. However, while indicating in the first line that he believes that art, with its purpose of analysing the flaws of society, was needed in New Zealand, he also points out that a "willing" audience did not exist. Despite this obstacle of having only a small audience, though, writers like Sargeson, G. R. Gilbert and Pearson himself persisted in their efforts.

Frank Sargeson, the key figure in the anti-Puritan movement, was Gilbert's friend and literary mentor. Gilbert's writing was concerned with the constraints society placed on personal freedom, and his emphasis on freedom - and the lack thereof - becomes apparent in the title of his first collection, *Free to Laugh and Dance*, the stress lying on the importance of independence and freedom from restrictions. The title suggests Gilbert's conscious awareness of the core problem of New Zealand society: the prescribed dullness of puritanism. In his

unpublished article "I remember, I remember" (1984) Gilbert comments on the collection of stories:

Now that I re-read those little stories that I wrote in the Public Library in 1940 and early 1941 I can see that my left hand didn't know what my right hand was doing. For the stories show no sign of my turning away, they are all imbued with anti-war sentiments, the melancholy of living in such a time. It was, I fancy, a melancholy I invented in the service of literature rather than an experienced emotion. I was enjoying life, I was young, I was free, I had struck an attitude and suffered (a little) for my ideals. Around me swirled that war-time life so much more spontaneous, so much less encumbered than the tedious tempo of peace-time. Indeed, my friends were disappearing one by one, dragged off to the training camps of Waiouru or Burnham. But this sensation of living on borrowed time gave our lives spice. (Gilbert, "I remember" 9)

While on the one hand Gilbert is saying that the melancholy and emotions in these stories was "invented", that he was really "enjoying life", on the other hand he stresses that the Second World War brought with it excitement that stood in stark contrast to peace-time; so he does confirm that at least the dullness he criticises in *Free to Laugh in Dance* is not invented but was quite real, quite palpable. The title *Free to Laugh and Dance* in itself - with its emphasis on pleasure - openly shows that Gilbert's attitude was avowedly anti-puritan. What is true for Gilbert, as it is for Sargeson, is Moffat's argument that "[w]riters need something to engage the emotions, to stir convictions, to react against. Puritanism is such a force in New Zealand's early literary history" (Moffat 407).

Realism.

Writers in the critically thin and inhospitable environment were more or less obliged to become artist-critics. It is a given of an emerging provincial culture such as that of New Zealand that the artist, always overly conscious of his or her predicament and the difficulties of making art, wrote parables of writing, choosing alienated, sensitive hero(in)es who confront a lumpen, philistine society. This mode persisted for the lifetime of the Sargeson generation; no one writes like that any more, but there was nothing else to write about then. James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist* (1916) is the prototype and model, and literary modernism, by definition so self-conscious and hieratic, the mode.

In their search for a style that would suit social critique, artists turned overseas for inspiration, and the tool that seemed most appropriate was that of realism. According to Lawrence Jones the dominant literary mode of the 1930s and 1940s was a critical realism which offered the

reader an exposé of society's misconceptions:

Central to both the theory and practice of this critical realism was the deflation of N.Z. myths of itself as a Pastoral Paradise and a Just City, realism as the deconstruction of Utopia. (Jones 1987: 11)

Realism arose in France in the eighteenth century as a reaction against the social changes brought about by the French Revolution. These changes affected especially the working class, and writers such as Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert opened up new ways of writing by making this class their subject - something that had not been done before - in order to subtly educate the bourgeoisie about the appalling situation of the working class. Prose writing was adapted in a way that analysed society's flaws without overt commentary and the placing of blame through the author; instead it exposed society's flaws to the reader and let the reader draw their own conclusions from what they had done.

The parallels between the situation in France and the situation in New Zealand are obvious: the Depression had forced negative social changes on New Zealand society by bringing unemployment and poverty to the majority of the population, and a literary mode was needed that suited the portrayal of these circumstances in a critical light. The non-moralising and non-intrusive nature of the French realist mode seemed ideal, as it provoked the reader to think about issues without feeling threatened or alienated. In his discussion of Bill Pearson's article "Fretful Sleepers" Patrick Evans concludes:

... there is only one way to ... summon our fellows from their fretful sleep - the artist must enlighten the puritan without destroying him. Art, in this view, becomes a means of moral instruction, not an élitist form of destructive criticism which alienates those who should be attracted to it. Art should become a popular form, and thus needs to be realistic in manner and indirect in method. (Evans September 1976: 252)

Sargeson and Curnow were both well read in overseas literature and familiar with the tenets of realism - in fact, one of Kendrick Smithyman's main criticisms of Curnow's poetic was what he saw as its excessive validation of reality - what he called "the recovery of reality as immediacy" (Smithyman 40). For his part, Sargeson used a sophisticated critical realism in his fiction from about the mid-1930s - sophisticated because of an actual subversion of realism that has become evident only with the passage of time. Both men were part of a cultural nationalism which was setting out to establish a particularly "New Zealand" literature,

and both, because of the peculiar requirements of that project which obliged them to preach what they practised, wrote criticism as well as creative literature. Their criticism followed in the footsteps of Eric McCormick, whose *Letters and Art in New Zealand* (1940) was the first work to go significantly beyond mere bibliography. No one before him had written about New Zealand literature with such insight and discrimination. After him, Sargeson and Curnow were the first who were trenchantly critical in their approach to and criticism of local writing. As Mark Williams stresses, both these men were "crucial in the 'birth' of a national literature" and "fulfilled the role of mid-wives" (Williams 711); they did so by having clear views about what they themselves were doing and what they thought their fellows should do. Much of what they thought derived from overseas traditions.

While Curnow initially seems to have looked mainly to Europe and applied those European standards to New Zealand, Sargeson looked to countries such as America, Australia and South Africa, which are more closely related to the New Zealand setting in that they were also colonies and thus faced with similar problems of a colonial background and the task of establishing a postcolonial identity distinct from the colonising country. In contrast to Sargeson, Curnow did not emphasize puritanism in tackling the provincial dilemma, possibly because he was too much at home with it, having been brought up by a father who was a minister and having almost followed the call of the church himself. Instead, Curnow's main issues in relation to New Zealand literature are his stress on achieving both regionalism and realism, which involves critically representing local issues in their historical context. Peter J. Gibbons points out that Curnow's focus lay on "[spinning] a New Zealand poetic myth out of the threads of the local past - the intersecting worlds of Europe and Polynesia, the tensions between people and land" (Gibbons 331). So while others were engaged in deconstructing the myth of New Zealand as puritan utopia, Curnow, in the 1940s, was creating a new myth.

Allen Curnow

Although Curnow's influence on New Zealand literature is undeniable, his influence on Gilbert was not as great as Sargeson's. This, on the one hand, is due to Sargeson's mentoring relationship with Gilbert, and on the other because of Curnow's focus on poetry rather than prose. Curnow's main achievement has been that his critical writing about the development of a literary tradition shows that such developments have taken place - his observations, however subjective and tendentious, being the first of their kind to be made here. Where Curnow's points can be applied to writers of prose as much as to writers of poetry, they are discussed.

My other focus lies on illustrating the problematic side of Curnow, in an attempt to show that his critical writing, by being difficult to fathom due to its vagueness of terminology, might have confused more than encouraged writers like Gilbert who were eager to reflect their critical awareness in their creative writing.

One fundamental problem with Curnow's criticism is that it relies on vague and ambivalent terminology. This trait becomes obvious in his definition and use of the term "vision", which turns up repeatedly in his critical writing. Even though Curnow saw vision as a central element in differentiating between good and bad art, Curnow's definition of the term is rather unspecific: "things actually seen and faithfully reported" (Curnow 1987: 10). While it seems obvious that such observation and its "faithful report" are subject to individual perception, Curnow suggests otherwise:

If they [local poets] are themselves to write poems that transcend time and place, they must achieve a correct vision of their own time and place. (Curnow 1987: 202)

While one's "vision", as defined above by Curnow himself, is subjective by nature, Curnow in this last quote prescribes to the writer a "correct" version, thus implying that Curnow, not the poet himself, makes the distinction as to which vision is "correct" and which is not. The effort Curnow put into spinning a complex and far-reaching web of such criticism, creating a circular argument out of his terminology, is remarkable, and worth-while to analyse further in order to illustrate what critically interested writers such as Gilbert were faced with.

Curnow applied essentially subjective terms such as "vision" and "experience" to the work of other writers as though they were legitimate tools of criticism. For instance, he regards the poet's vision as vital to the value of the creative output: "[as] the vision varies in completeness and extent, so the abstract poetic qualities vary" (Curnow 1960: 11). Curnow goes even further in making his point by stating that "[it] is impossible to criticize the utterance, the 'poetry', by itself, without reflecting on the vision" (11). He thus uses this term as an object for criticism, as it is not the mere word but the vision that stands behind it that will be evaluated. This suggests that Curnow's criticism is subjective and determined by whether or not a writer's vision happens to coincide with his own, while he purports to be applying objective criteria. Instead of creating a criticism that is characterised by its clarity, in fact he measures subjectively.

Curnow links the idea of poetic vision to all aspects that he regards as vital for the New Zealand poet. In his article "New Zealand Literature: the Case for a Working Definition", he uses it to promote the use of regionalism in New Zealand writing:

A writer's vision may be said, I believe, to be mediated through that second body [i.e. a man's native country], in some sense analogous to the mediation of his personal body and the agonising limitation of his private individuality. (Curnow 1987: 193)

While he states explicitly what he understands as a misinterpretation of this regionalism, at no stage does he give a direct definition of how to create proper regionalism instead. The wrong kind of regionalism consists of taking superficial elements of native flora and fauna as a means of creating a distinctive New Zealand regionalism. In the article "Aspects of New Zealand Poetry" Curnow further elaborates on this mistake of false regionalism:

New Zealand was justified if it could be presented as a new, even a better, England. Later, the disinherited New Zealander escaped into fantasies of indigenous plant and tree-those gold blossoms of the Kowhai [refers to the anthology *Kowhai Gold*, 1930]. That is, . . . they tried prematurely to root themselves in the rain forests which they were, in fact, busily destroying. (Curnow 1987: 40)

This extract indicates the difficulty of reading Curnow, due to the lack of exactness in his statements. On the one hand, he seems to suggest that identifying New Zealand with England is wrong - yet those writers who seek to express difference are not doing it the right way either. The reader waiting for Curnow to provide an answer as to how he would like regionalism to be appropriately expressed instead, waits in vain.

Another mistake in connection with the absence of regionalism that Curnow severely criticised was the attempt to take a shortcut to "'greatness'" (Curnow 1987: 207) and success by setting out with the aim to write "universal" art:

This must account for the fondness, which amounts to an obsession with some of my younger New Zealand contemporaries, for reciting the truism that all 'great' literature is really 'universal'. Neither time, nor nation, nor region can limit or circumscribe it. (Curnow 1987: 196)

This mistaken brand of universality, according to him, comes from writing that is

"unlocalized" and "unspecific" (Curnow 1987: 199) because of his contemporaries' "incapacity to grasp or express the reality that presses upon them" (Curnow 1987: 201). The product, as far as he was concerned, was a contemporary writing in which "[e]veryone. . . is somebody, and no one's anybody. If universally anything, they are universally dull" (Curnow 1987: 198). A proper relationship with locality and region are the foundations of universality, in his view, which of course echoes Tate, (Curnow 1987: 197) and was essential to the proper writing of poetry; it is "written into the writer's contract with reality" (Curnow 1987: 200). There who did fulfil Curnow's criteria of having "accepted the disciplines of uncompromising fidelity to experience, of an unqualified responsibility to the truths of themselves, in this place, at that time" (Curnow 1987: 200) were D'Arcy Cresswell, Bruce Mason, Roderick Finlayson, Charles Brasch, John Mulgan, Denis Glover, A. R. D. Fairburn and Ursula Bethell.

So far we can conclude that the aspects Curnow was concerned with are not substantially different from the ones Sargeson discussed, though his treatment of these matters is substantially different. What is noteworthy is the difference in their attitude towards puritanism. While the negative effects of the prevailing puritan society were one of Sargeson's main foci, Curnow did not give anti-puritan writing much credit as a method of overcoming provincialism, purely because he seemed unable to relate to their dissatisfaction with society.

The vision of writers like these is narrowed, but also sharpened, by the dissatisfaction they so evidently feel with themselves and their subject. In their characters there is much self-pity and disgust with life. This is a local literature of protest. (Curnow 1987: 206)

This description is not flattering for the anti-puritan writers, as Curnow sees their dissatisfaction as originating primarily from within themselves, rather than having it forced on them from the outside. The use of "they" and "their" shows that Curnow did not identify with these anti-puritan writers. Judging by the writing in *Look Back Harder* Curnow is a man much more comfortable in pointing out what people do wrong, rather than praising them. This trait of Curnow's is in fact very much an expression of the puritan mindset, which as was pointed out before, consisted above entirely of prescriptive prohibitions. Taking this into consideration, the last sentence of this quote must have taken Curnow quite an effort, and can be seen as a compliment of sorts.

It was impossible for a young writer of the time, even of prose rather than poetry, to avoid getting caught to some degree in the webs that Curnow was spinning around the New Zealand

matter in these early days. We will see something of how his emphasis to the ideas about regionalism and realism in the period affected Gilbert in Chapter Two. It is interesting to note here, though, that while Curnow intended to begin something new, to move forward, his main focus lay on the country's past and manipulating this past to justify the present. So rather than start something new by taking the present as point of departure, Curnow was trying to walk forward with his head facing backwards, so to speak.

Frank Sargeson.

Sargeson's approach to creating a specific New Zealand writing reflected the general aim of the Centennial celebrations to acknowledge and consolidate a New Zealand identity, one determined and characterised by being distinct from Britain. The creation of a New Zealand culture that would allow people to identify as New Zealanders rather than Englishmen included the creation of a distinctive New Zealand literature. Sargeson spent much time and thought on such a venture.

While he was familiar with realists such as the brothers Goncourt, Emile Zola, André Gide, Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden and George Eliot (Sargeson 137f, 142, 144, 148, 87, 73), he was aware that he could not simply copy any of these writers. Instead, he put his efforts into adding a unique New Zealand flavour to his writing. The "[novelist] can only write convincingly and well of what he knows best - and that, of course, is New Zealand life" (Sargeson 51). However, in the process Sargeson found that he had several obstacles to overcome. These obstacles can be divided into two main categories: formal questions like that of language, narrator, characters, and realist mode; and subject matter, the latter involving aspects such as the colonial ties to Britain, isolation, locality and puritanism. The discussion of the subject matter seems to be intrinsically connected to the decisions Sargeson made on technical matters, as we shall see in the following.

"What *was* this material of New Zealand life? What was it exactly?" (Sargeson 55). In his search for answers Sargeson started questioning issues such as New Zealand's colonial past and its influences on contemporary society. In his reading he turned to other countries with a colonial background, such as America, South Africa and Australia. He found that the writers of these countries had already succeeded in "throwing-off ... hindering English influences" (Sargeson 59), not just in matters of language and subject matter, but also in creating their own characters, such as Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer. It is with regret

that Sargeson pointed out that by 1950, "[u]nfortunately, nothing comparable to Twain or Lawson has happened in New Zealand" (Sargeson 60). Sargeson not only blamed the indifferent, even discouraging reading public of New Zealand, but also an unnamed "local critic" (Sargeson 60), clearly Allen Curnow, for the lack of progress. This unnamed critic severely criticised local writers - or "scolded" them, as Sargeson appropriately puts it - for "slavishly following a variety of overseas fashions" without realising that "his entire critical principle was lifted, *en bloc*, from critical writing that happened to be fashionable in England at the time" (Sargeson 60).

What did Sargeson find in the writing of other colonial countries? In his discussion of the Australian writer Rolf Boldrewood's novel *Robbery Under Arms* (1881, 1888) he points out the key elements that he feels need acknowledgement and analysis in an early postcolonial society. It involves dealing with the country's history and the implications that go with it: all colonial societies, he says, have a dream at the centre, a utopian vision, of finding a new place to start afresh and not repeat mistakes made before. However, the main message appears to be that such a dream is but a dream, and that problems cannot be avoided:

Starlight and the men of the Marston family are at war with the society of their day. They just can't take it. Starlight got out of England to escape it there, and Dad escaped it by being transported; but what they escaped from is waiting for them out in Australia in its colonial form. So they try to escape again, with the two boys following their lead. But now, having already arrived at the ends of the earth, there is the problem of discovering a fresh place to escape to. Somewhere there *must* be a place (it is the semi-conscious wish, the dream at the heart of all colonizing movements surely); and sure enough they discover the remote and idyllic Hollow, where there are good streams, good grass for their stolen horses and cattle, and a good convenient cave in which they can live and be secure. (Sargeson 44)

It is in this extract of Sargeson's review that it becomes most obvious what he so admired about this piece of writing. Even though at first glance the work appears to be "an out of date Australian 'western'" (Sargeson 43), it is in fact, he argues, a story that encapsulates the entire early history of colonial settlement in Australia. Furthermore, it puts the experiences of those early settlers into perspective, the key concepts being escapism from poor living conditions in the old world, then still "at war with society", and the "dream" of finding a better place. By drawing the comparison between the effect prison has had on Dick, the protagonist, to what the office or factory job does to men in the contemporary society of 1950, Sargeson is already implying that he can see himself adopting a social realist approach in his critique of the New Zealand scene.

In another article Sargeson discusses Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* which he describes as "a literary masterpiece" despite its technical shortcomings (Sargeson 108). Again, what he admires is what he sees as the significant meaning of the text, Schreiner's "deal[ing] with the large problems which she saw contemporary society confronted with, even though the particular society she belonged to might seem to be hardly aware that any such problems existed" (Sargeson 109f). Furthermore, in his view, Schreiner saw "no place for Mind or Imagination, in the kind of society which nineteenth-century colonialism was aiming at" (Sargeson 110), something which Sargeson felt closely resembled New Zealand society, with its hostility to intellect and imagination. This clinging-on to an outmoded colonial mindset is a major part of the subject matter that Sargeson was to adapt to the New Zealand context, as is society's puritanism, which he brings up in his article on D. H. Lawrence, whom he saw as another partner in arms. Here he takes the opportunity to talk about the puritanism that he describes as "characteristic of all English-colonial settlement [and the] poisonous psychological and social effects that [it produced] hand in hand with nineteenth-century industrial and finance capitalism" (Sargeson 47).

Puritanism thus he saw as another part of the colonial heritage, but so important an influence that it was to become his personal place of critical attack, both in his creative writing and in his theory. A writer who comes out of what he calls "little Bethel", he says,

[f]requently will come from a home that is female-dominated and tends to be a mother's boy; frequently he will be opinionative, theory-ridden, arrogant, priggish, tending to argue and preach in and out of season; his Puritanism will not really admit compromise and he will want things one hundred per cent, demanding perfection in both life and literature, and setting up a howl when he doesn't get it; he will always tend to be a little upset at the sight of people taking their pleasure, and when he finds himself in the company of those whose background he recognizes as quite different from his own, he will tend to suffer abominably from feelings of inferiority and envy. And sometimes it will all bring him to the point where, instead of seeing himself in the modest role of self-liberator. . . , he will feel himself chosen to be the saviour of the entire world-in which case he will be fortunate if he has powerful qualities that may compensate and save him from becoming completely insane (Sargeson 47)

Sargeson was forced into the anti-puritan role by a society that rejected him not only for what he was by choice, an artist, but also for what he was by birth, a homosexual. He identifies Lawrence as a fellow writer who was "hopelessly implicated in the complex" (Sargeson 47) described above. For him, Lawrence stood out as special because he had the knowledge that "there was no real or immediate escape for himself or anybody else" (Sargeson 48), which is also the lesson to be learned from Boldrewood's novel. In this attitude the past has been taken into account, and thus a step has been made to overcoming provincialism: one which involves no more escapism as during colonial times, but instead a determination to face problems and attempt to solve them. If the writer does avoid finding means to escape and aims to disentangle himself sufficiently from his past to see clearly and objectively what is wrong with society and point it out to others, according to Sargeson, "the devil is recognised and defeated if only on the printed page" (Sargeson 48).

In his discussion of Roderick Finlayson's novel *Tidal Creek* Sargeson talks about the relation between the author and his characters and the matter of honesty in writing. While Finlayson's character Uncle Ted is based on a real person, in the written form he becomes a creation, something different and transformed yet still "indubitably flesh and blood" (Sargeson 40). This creative process implies a realism of some sort, but one which does not copy from life, creating a sort of duplicate, but instead creates a particular reality for the reader which seems convincing and thus possible. As Sargeson puts it, "he [Finlayson] attempts to give literary body to what is for him essentially true and vital in the colonial spirit" (Sargeson 40). This sentence holds another realist aspect, that the writing has to have an issue, which in this case is to make sense of the colonial heritage and its impact on the present. That explains too why Sargeson points out earlier that to appreciate the book, it is of advantage for the reader to know the country's "historical background" (Sargeson 40).

The connection between anti-puritanism and realist writing as a tool of social critique becomes evident when we consider Sargeson's comment that what is most obvious about the New Zealand scene is its distortion of reality. This distortion of reality is caused by New Zealand's "particular variety of puritanism", which manifests itself especially in "the 'shalt nots' - and everything that flows from attempts to regulate human conduct by a system of rigid prohibitions" (Sargeson 60f). As has been said before, he was very much against the effects of secular puritanism, and when he sums up the novelist's task as "representing and recreating the New Zealand scene . . . [while] at the same time [making] a criticism of it" (Sargeson 61),

he has created the formula for a social realist-based writing in New Zealand, his place of attack being puritanism.

But both critic and creative writer lacked a literary tradition to build on, a tradition that had an established base of critical criteria which were ready to be applied to any literature that was produced. He discusses this in a review of Dan Davin's novel *Roads from Home* (1949):

It is probably worth noting that a review of a New Zealand novel may be as difficult to write as the novel itself. The labour will not, of course, be nearly so prolonged, but in each case the difficulties will be similar. And perhaps one may very briefly sum them up by saying that for the novelist the question will be: Where am I to derive my standards of excellence from? For the critic: What standards of judgement have I? Unlike the Australians we have no established tradition of our own, which we may choose either to accept and develop, or else take as a point of departure. Hence the somewhat haphazard variety of our novels and criticism. (Sargeson 36)

Obviously Sargeson was one of the people wanting to help create a beginning, which was something he tended to do, unlike Curnow, by explaining what solutions he has come to and what processes have been involved in finding them. His comments on vision seem to be a direct response to Curnow, pointing out that such visions of reality are manifold because each individual perceives reality in a different way. This subjectivity allows for different artistic results, none of which is necessarily wrong.

First there was the New Zealand scene which all who live in New Zealand can more or less see for themselves: now that scene has been represented or recreated on paper. How many people are going to agree that the novelist has seen it accurately? How much of it has been left out? - how much put in? - and for what reasons? Are the characters in the story truly representative New Zealanders? These are the sort of questions I want to consider. But, by the way, please note that what I have said, assumes that our novel will be what is loosely called a naturalistic or realistic one ... (Sargeson 57)

The realism Sargeson is criticising here is the sort which attempts to portray objectively some kind of commonly-agreed reality, thus pushing forward the heterosexual white middle-class monoculture and ignoring anything that lies outside this narrow but dominant segment of reality. Rather than do this, Sargeson sets out to create something that *seems* real to the reader, giving it the quality of verisimilitude. As he puts it, "[our] novel then, represents or recreates the local scene" (Sargeson 57).

Maybe Sargeson's appreciation of "transparent honesty" (Sargeson 40) in the writing implies a

substitute for the impossible concept of realism - rather than leaving himself wide open to criticism by talking about realism, truth and honesty are convenient replacements. They evoke the idea of looking through the often-misleading appearance of the world around us, and getting to the crux of the matter.

I mentioned just now the writer's insatiable interest in his search for reality, so if you will accept the proposition that there may be many subdivisions in the reality estate, perhaps I can sell you a section. (Sargeson 97)

Here Sargeson yet again stresses that reality depends on individual perception, and thus emphasises his special attention to this matter. His early stories are a reflection of this process, as they show new ways to portray New Zealand reality. Lydia Wevers describes Sargeson's particular kind of "reality estate" in her article "Nationalism and Social Realism, 1920s-1950s". What makes Sargeson's writing special, according to Wevers, is its "effect of having 'put in' the 'third dimension'" (267). By this Wevers means the special effect of realness that Sargeson creates through stylistic technique: his confining of information, points of view, and narrative explanation to "an image and an anecdotal voice" (Wevers 267). This technique involves the reader to a greater extent than does more conventional realism: "The will to understand Sargeson's stories lies in the will to 'read' his idiom" (Wevers 267). Sargeson constructs a framework which he does not fill in with much information, either facts or explanations. The quintessence of this method is the wartime story, "The Hole that Jack Dug", with its contemporary feel of an almost postmodernist selfconsciousness that makes it read almost as a Lacanian parable of writing – what *does* the reference to Jack's mother's meatsafe mean? why *is* Jack digging the hole?

It is up to the reader to participate in making the narrative and to construct or find meaning in stories like this. This technique implies a very different kind of realism, as it gives the readers the option to create their own reality by using the props provided by Sargeson and adding meaning to the spaces left empty for this purpose. As Lydia Wevers points out, "[it] is this kind of politically educative destabilizing of narrative and narrator while 'writing' his fictions in a provincial realist idiom deeply familiar to his audience that characterizes Sargeson's best work" (269). Sargeson deliberately made his fictions a challenge to his readers, and its special nature explains why "what strikes one readership historically as 'reality' may well strike later readers quite differently" (Wevers 266). As Wevers emphasises, it "is ironic that [Sargeson's] work should have been acclaimed for its convincing realism when his narratives consistently

work to undermine notions of the real" (269). What Sargeson's writing thus brings into the open above all is the "'realness' of uncertainty" (Wevers 269) which is a reflection of the cultural context. Sargeson's work can be described as social realist in the way that he uses fiction to analyse the New Zealand subject matter, capturing critical images of the individual in his struggle with New Zealand society.

It is obvious, then, that part of creating a distinctive New Zealand writing is not merely a question of the subject matter: the New Zealand content must be complemented by formal aspects such as language, characters and narrative style. In his reading of every New Zealand novel available, Sargeson noticed that "in almost every case, language which did not differ a very great deal from that used by English novelists, was used to deal with the material of New Zealand life" (Sargeson 54). Consequently he set himself the task "to create such a language" (Sargeson 55) – to create a fictional discourse appropriate for New Zealand. At this stage, then, Sargeson decided that "[he] still had to rid [himself] of another sort of copying. Copying language, as it were" (Sargeson 54). He found a role model in Boldrewood, who had achieved what Sargeson was aiming for in the New Zealand context: to use a language that reflects on its local origin. He found that the way Boldrewood employed the Australian vernacular in *Robbery Under Arms* expressed itself "wonderfully fresh, alive, and transfigured on the printed page, wonderfully immediate and animated" (Sargeson 44). He thus set out to employ a distinctly New Zealand vernacular in his own stories. Especially in his early writing, he used working class characters whose low level of education was reflected in their language, a restriction applied not just to the characters and their speech and thought, but also to the narrator.

Sargeson's special early trait of making the narrator illiterate is quite remarkable. In his attempt to move away from British influence, he shifts his writing from the literary to the oral presentation. The narrator's voice is given the quality of verisimilitude, which means that an illusion of reality is created for the reader. Thus the emphasis lies on the realistic effect rather than on realist writing: the difference is that, rather than try to replicate something that actually happened, the author creates something that appears to have happened or happens at that moment. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth points out that "verisimilitude. . . is an abstraction. . . [and] no simple or natural expression; on the contrary, it is a highly artificial and achieved effect" (Ermarth 566). Ermarth suggests that the realistic effect is achieved by "the management. . . of perspective in time" (Ermarth 567f), the adherence of details and events to

the particular time frame. While Ermarth suggests the omniscient narrator as ideal for the above purposes, Sargeson found a way to make it work with his first person, "obtuse" narrator.

In an interview with Michael Beveridge in 1970, Sargeson talks about this early method in a particular way: "[T]here is a constricting factor in using the first person, more particularly when I have assumed the mask of a person who is not literate" (Sargeson 158). It is quite interesting that he chooses the term "mask" instead of "narrator" or "character", as the latter two suggest independent entities while the "mask" stresses the close relationship between author and subject. This leads to the question of authorial intervention. Traditionally, in French realism the author abstained from intruding through direct narrative comment - in order to give the reader more leeway. However, Sargeson's technique shows that despite there being no obvious intrusion by the narrator, the author is still in charge.

I feel probably a lot of writers, at least once in their lifetime, feel that they can get around to a book and use a mask which is fairly close to, but not exactly the same as, the author behind the work. (Sargeson 158)

It is implied, then, that if you have the right kind of narrator in the first place, overt moralising becomes superfluous as the text speaks for itself. It becomes a matter of finding the right mask for the author. The most explicit statement concerning authorial intrusion Sargeson made was in a review of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, in which he implied that he regarded overt authorial intervention and moralising, in the form of direct comments by the narrator, as "breaking [the] rules about novel-writing" (Sargeson 101). Sargeson thus displays a realist attitude derived from French realist origins.

The question of Gilbert's relation to the issues Sargeson dealt with, and to Sargeson himself, will be discussed in the next chapter. Particularly important is the question whether and how Gilbert attempted to overcome the provincial dilemma in his writing, and in what manner he expressed his anti-puritanism. While the dominant literary mode of the 1930s and 1940s was a critical realism, part of my analysis of Gilbert will establish whether or not he followed what has been called "the realistic school" (Chapman 29). I suggest that the question of literary mode, or style, is more than an aesthetic question, as the emphasis lay on where to turn for inspiration, and whether writers and critics turned to Britain or away from Britain in this search is an important factor. The 1930s have been considered as the beginnings of New

Zealand literature as such, the beginning of something unique to these islands. And it is this uniqueness that has been prescribed in various ways by some and applied by others. None of these writers, however, managed to achieve the goal of writing that grand New Zealand novel everyone was hoping for [FOOTNOTE: SEE SARGESON 54] and thus create a distinctively New Zealand tradition in one attempt, but they are all part of the puzzle that creates one big picture. And while Gilbert has only a small part to play, the overall picture would be incomplete without him.

Chapter 2

Gilbert Published

This chapter follows on from the previous one in that it analyses Gilbert's professionally published works in the context of the New Zealand literary scene of the 1930s and 1940s. When Gilbert is mentioned in the critical discussion of this literary period it is in close reference to Frank Sargeson. The analysis of Gilbert's works from this time suggests that such a claim is partly justified in that it is the period in Gilbert's career that he is closest to Sargeson. Gilbert's writing reflects that even though he did not actively participate in the public debate on New Zealand writing as Curnow and Sargeson did, he was very much aware of the issues under discussion. His writing mirrors his engagement with issues such as how to portray the New Zealand subject matter through a critical realism, sometimes interwoven with magical elements, a distinct regionalism, sometimes created through a snapshot image of society, at other times employing description of nature; the use of the Man Alone pattern which he chose as many a "sensitive individual [reacting to] the repressive society" (Jones 1998a: 157) around him did. It will be shown that Sargeson's influence on Gilbert's style is most detectable in his first publication, *Free to Laugh and Dance* (1942), while a definite move away from Sargeson's realistic school has taken place in Gilbert's second publication *Glass-sharp and Poisonous* (1952).

Gilbert's autobiographical writing

Before moving on to the textual analysis of Gilbert's work it is helpful to outline how Gilbert evolved from being the son of a puritan middle-class West Coast couple to a man with the ambition to be a writer, and closely associated with the anti-puritan Sargeson.

According to Gilbert's unpublished autobiography "A Reading Writing Man" he was an extremely avid reader in his youth, devouring any book that aroused his interest, which as he said was purely intuitive and in ignorance of the books' literary values: "I vaguely equated 'literature' with 'boring', I still do" (Gilbert, "A Reading Writing Man" 59). It was not until he began an apprenticeship as a clerk in the Westport Customs Department in 1933 that he found himself driven to start writing in order to survive the boredom and monotony of his

profession. Gilbert's first short story, "A Man of Habit", was thus not only written at work but also heavily influenced by his sentiments towards work. "A Man of Habit" tells the story of a civil servant who goes to work as he has done every single working day over the last forty years, but on this particular day finds that no one notices him at work, the reason being that he is such a creature of habit that he has not even noticed his own death (Gilbert, "A Reading Writing Man" 141f). Gilbert got this short story published in *The Public Service Journal* and from this fact enthusiastically concluded: "I was a writer! I was an accepted writer! I was a paid accepted writer!" (Gilbert, "A Reading Writing Man" 146).

While this first enthusiasm was followed by an increased urge to write, it was also met with frustration as publication of other work seemed impossible. A change of career proved to be a lucky coincidence for Gilbert's ambition as a writer. In 1937 Gilbert quit the Customs Office in Wellington, to which he had been transferred the previous year, and started a new career with the broadcasting service, where he became involved in both the technical behind-the-scenes and the creative side involving research and presentation. It was through this job that he met Anton Vogt, a confident young man who wrote poetry. Through this friendship and the discussions on literature and politics, Gilbert's interest in the New Zealand literary scene was aroused. Vogt was also the person who first introduced Gilbert to Sargeson's writing—as can be seen in the following extract from the second part of Gilbert's unpublished autobiography, "Reading, Writing and Revolution" (1993), in which he describes his first visit to Anton Vogt's home in 1938:

That same evening Tony took me out to his home in Petone. . . for a meal. The meal was eaten in silence for it was the sort of meal that discouraged conversation, it was not in that sense a Vogtian meal although as it was inspired by Tony's latest enthusiasm, it was indeed a most Vogtian meal, a meal which represented the Vogtian mind at its extreme reach, a meal which represented, at that time, a unique nutritional and gastronomical novelty. While Tony prepared the meal I wandered around and examined Tony's interesting books and his interesting ornaments set out among furniture of Scandinavian elegance, . . . and I looked through the latest copy of the periodical Tomorrow and began reading a few lines of a little story by Frank, only a sketch really, the first I had ever read although of course 'I knew the name', the name 'Sargeson' was known to me in a distant legendary sort of way but at the time Frank's published works consisted of the little booklet, Conversation with my Uncle, which was not generally stocked by the bookshops. Then, as I read casually in Tony's living room, I was not much attracted by Frank's little story, although I realised that 'because of the name' the story [must] have some excellence, an excellence that was hidden from me at the time although I must admit that the appeal of much of Frank's work is still veiled from me. Weak creature that I was then and still am I would have preferred something more passionate, more unbuttoned, less worked-up, I speak as a reader, of course, just as a reader. The meal was an easy meal to prepare, for it consisted of a plate of boiled wheat for each of us so not long after I had finished reading Frank's little contribution in that issue of Tomorrow and had bogged

down in 'Tomorrow's politics' the meal was served. (Gilbert, "Reading, Writing and Revolution" 85-87)

It becomes clear from this extract that Gilbert felt a sense of awe for Sargeson, even though, as he freely admits, he could not see the special merits of Sargeson's writing—and stresses also that his approach was readerly, not literary—thus putting the focus on the enjoyment reading evokes, which it seems he could not see in Sargeson's writing—and thus shying away from direct literary criticism.

Gilbert's friendship with Anton Vogt continued and in 1939 he was introduced to Vogt's newlywed wife Rosilind who was not at all intellectually interested, but indulged in matters of domesticity, looking after husband and children. Gilbert has captured Vogt commenting on this matter one day in 1939:

'Of course I need to live another life, away from the house. Away from the domesticity. . .'

I could understand that. Tony domesticated would be a sort of nightmare.

'Of course,' I said.

'I don't want you getting the wrong idea,' Tony told me. 'I'm not turning into another ex-liberal bourgeois. I'm not "settling down".'

And it was obvious that for a man like Tony who was a 'man with a mission', or, quite likely a number of missions of which encouraging a love of 'literature' often by, as it were, personal contact was primary, would never have the time for shopping cleaning cooking gardening or washing.

Frank would complain to me about the same problem. 'Look at all this,' he would say waving one hand at his extensive garden which was planted all around the old army hut at 14 Esmond Road in 1940, a gesture taking in the pumpkin vines, the sweet peppers, the lettuces, the beans, the compost heaps. 'It doesn't happen by itself,' said Frank. 'It takes time. If the writer has to grow his own food and do all the housework and cooking and washing he doesn't have much time to write, or to read. Even going down to the dairy to buy the bread takes time. Writing and reading are supposed to be a writer's job, all the time it takes for just living is wasted time. Even if you cut out as much as you can,' Frank would say, 'it's still wasted time. A writer should be able to just get up in the morning and go to his writing table and begin work, reading or writing or whatever.'

The ideal writing under the ideal writing conditions was always close to Frank's heart for he had the misfortune to work under circumstances of almost total disregard, in a country which didn't care what conditions writers had to put up with, for readers who didn't exist, where a man did a man's work and writing was not considered to be a man's work, not a proper man's work, not at any rate in Godzone at that time, not unless his name happened to be, say Zane Grey. My father and many other discerning male New Zealand readers had a very high opinion of Zane Grey. (Gilbert, "Reading, Writing and Revolution" 96-98)

Gilbert thus confirms what has been said in the previous chapter: that it was a struggle to be a writer in New Zealand at that time, and especially hard when you had to look after yourself. However, Gilbert's account of what eventually happens to Anton Vogt shows that marriage is

not the practical solution for being relieved of practical burdens it promised to be for Vogt: in 1962, after twenty-three years, Vogt's wife Rosilind took the children, "if not bodily, then in sympathy" (Gilbert, "Reading, Writing and Revolution" 110), and left him for good, tired of having to do everything herself around the house and of her husband's frequent affairs.

Some years later another coincidence had it that Gilbert's fiancée Joy became friends with Bob Lowry who attended teacher's college in Auckland with her. Bob Lowry in turn introduced both Joy and G. R. Gilbert to Frank Sargeson in 1940 or 1941.² The Gilberts, especially Garvin, became good friends of Sargeson. This friendship was both personal and literary—a fact that is illustrated by Sargeson's double role as Gilbert's mentor and godfather of his first child.

When Miles, our first son, was due to be christened we approached Frank with the request that he stand godfather. It was the only time I ever saw Frank truly non-plussed. All he could say at first was: 'Well, I can't give him a christening cup or anything like that,' and 'You can't expect me to see that he keeps up his religion.' 'Of course not,' we reassured Frank. We told him that we would be complimented and that Miles would be honoured by having such a highly esteemed literary godparent. So he agreed. (Gilbert, "The Good Friend" 3)

It is reasonably safe to say that had it not been for Frank Sargeson and his connection to Denis Glover, publisher of the Caxton Press at the time, Gilbert's work might easily never have been published. The publication of his first works in *Free to Laugh and Dance* has thus to be seen in the context of Gilbert being closely involved with the writing scene surrounding Sargeson. The people Gilbert became acquainted with were Denis Glover, Anna Kavan, Greville Texidor, John Reece Cole, Christine Cole Catley, Allen Curnow, A.R.D. Fairburn, James K. Baxter and the composer Douglas Lilburn.³ According to Gilbert's letters to his wife Joy, he spent nine days with the Glovers in October 1941, getting editorial advice from Glover for *Free to Laugh and Dance*, which Glover had agreed to publish.⁴ Gilbert had at this stage joined the airforce and was constantly on the move between airforce stations in New Zealand. His letters indicate that he used every opportunity to meet up with literary friends in different places as best he could.

² According to Gilbert ("The Good Friend") he and Sargeson first met in 1940, according to Sargeson it was in 1941 (King 236).

³ Refer to interview with Joy Gilbert conducted by Jasmin Brandt in July 1999.

⁴ Macmillan Brown Archives: MB 957: Box 16: black folder containing correspondence 1940-1946.

While Gilbert's autobiography suggests close personal involvement with Sargeson, it is not sufficient evidence to claim that Gilbert was part of the group referred to as the "sons" of Sargeson. However, close analysis of his work, which in the last sixty years has not been carried out by literary critics, shows that the first collection of Gilbert's stories, *Free to Laugh and Dance*, does indeed show strong traces of Sargeson's literary influence—even though Gilbert himself denied this apparent influence in later years: "[from] the start [Gilbert] had never been one of them [the sons of Sargeson] and [Gilbert's] implicit repudiation of the Saroyanesque for what some regarded as the meaningless was of no help at all" (Gilbert 1987: xvi). It has to be noted though that this denial of influence is made forty-five years later, in Gilbert's vanity-press re-edition of *Free to Laugh and Dance*, to which he has added an introduction, written by himself under the pseudonym "Carelton Brizel". In his later years then, Gilbert did attempt some direct literary criticism, under the heavy disguise of fictitious critics, in the prefaces and introductions of his vanity-press works. In what form did his critical awareness find expression in the 1940s?

Literary criticism in Gilbert's work

While we have said that the artist of this period was often one of writer-critic, this role took on different forms, as it could be expressed through direct literary criticism describing how to write novels and poetry—such as in the writings of Sargeson and Curnow—or through creative writing that employed such advice artistically and thus created a creative form of criticism. According to the following excerpt from his unpublished autobiography "A Reading Writing Man", Gilbert tried only once to get any formal criticism published—and was rejected.

I ventured on a little criticism some forty years ago⁵ but Charles (C. Brasch 1909 to 1973) returned it to me with the kind suggestion that I reconsider it. I did so and was so embarrassed not only at having written such rubbish but also at having submitted it to the premier 'literary' journal⁶ that I hid the MS and have never wanted to find it since. I was, I realised, a 'reader', my response to fiction was 'readerly' not 'critical'. (Gilbert, "A Reading Writing Man" 135)

Even though Gilbert did not repeat his efforts to write formal criticism in those years, his creative writing suggests a high level of awareness of the critical issues under discussion at the time. It can even be said that Gilbert developed a way to incorporate criticism into his

⁵ Judging by letters to publishers this first autobiography was written in the 1980s.

⁶ I assume Gilbert is referring to *Landfall* here.

work, with the emphasis on keeping the reader in mind, and making the reading process fun for the "common reader" (Gilbert, "A Reading Writing Man" 134). This democratisation of *haute* literature suggests an attempt to proletarianise literature, to make it not just the sole preserve of educated cliques.

The attitude that goes with wanting to write for a majority, and the wish to be somehow part of this majority is reflected in Gilbert's unpublished article "I remember, I remember" (1984).⁷ The article suggests that Gilbert's political convictions somewhat forced him into the role of the outsider, the Man Alone—it was thus something he wrote about because it affected him personally. Gilbert explains in this article that due to his pacifist and especially communist involvement he was forced to quit his job with the broadcasting service, and as he moved to Wellington he found himself confronted with preparations for sending troops overseas which had an effect on him he had not anticipated:

The sight of those marching columns, in battle dress, wearing their distinctive lemon-squeezer hats, swinging along behind the military bands always brought a tear to my eye and a tightness to my throat convinced PPU [Peace Pledge Union] person though I still considered that I was. But, as I was to realise, my convictions were slowly being undermined by a growing presentment that the pacifist attitude was irrelevant and fatally isolating in a world dissolved into total war. War, and this world it brought into being, was everywhere—to escape being an accessory one would have to cease to breathe. Even more importantly, I was coming to regret that this most apocalyptic event of my generation might pass me by—was I going to stand aside, lose out. In those days the future lay with the war. (Gilbert, "I remember" 8f)

What stands out about this quote is the sense of "inner division" Moffat has described as one of the features of the Man Alone (Moffat 284). Here we find that Gilbert was experiencing this trope himself: on the one hand, as his stories illustrate, he was against war due to the devastating effects of warfare on the individual: on the other hand his non-participation isolated him increasingly from the rest of society and the war proved an unexpected fascination for him. In order to volunteer for military service Gilbert had to "[renounce] his pacifism publicly in an apologia printed in the PPU's underground newsheet [sic]" (Gilbert 1987: xix).

The paradox Gilbert saw himself confronted with was that on an abstract level participation meant being part of the "war-machine" (Gilbert 1942: 25), thus requiring him to give up personal freedom. On another level, however, the war promised Gilbert a sense of

⁷ See appendix for a copy of this article.

"unexpected freedom" (Gilbert, "I remember" 2). As Gilbert he describes it in his article: "War-time loosens all ties [and] dissolves habitual behaviour" (2) which implies that the war actually had a positive effect on New Zealand society, as Gilbert saw it. So Gilbert speaks not only for himself when he describes how the war turned him from a "house mouse" into a "wandering mouse":

But for that momentous evening of September 4 1939 when I was a green stick of twentytwo [sic] I would have remained a house mouse well content with the comfy wainscot. I was prepared to settle down and make a nice nest and take out cat insurance against days of ill fortune. But the house caught fire and the whole world burnt and I was transmogrified into a wandering mouse. The mill stones of security and respectability [sic] which I had accepted (not without a battle of course) from my parents, and which I had worn with really no sense of discomfort, dropped away. Through no effort of my own I was made somewhat freer. (Gilbert, "I remember" 2)

The change of heart described in this article led Gilbert to volunteer to join the air force. This allowed him to be part of the majority—something that had only become attractive due to the changed circumstances brought about by the war. It seems surprising though that Gilbert's change of attitude does not become at all apparent in *Free to Laugh and Dance*. Gilbert comments on this phenomenon himself in "I remember, I remember".

Now that I re-read those little stories that I wrote in the [Wellington] Public Library in 1940 and early 1941 I can see that my left hand didn't know what my right hand was doing. For the stories show no sign of my turning away, they are all imbued with anti-war sentiments, the melancholy of living in such a time. (Gilbert, "I remember" 9)

It has to be said though that Gilbert's change of attitude did not mean that he chose to be involved in battle. He was working with radar. And his autobiographical stories about his experiences in the Solomon Islands suggest that he saw his involvement as an adventure and a chance to learn about other countries and cultures rather than a chance to use weapons and be a hero. His emphasis on promoting peace from within the war-machine is further stressed by his later employment as a peace keeper in Kashmir.

***Free to Laugh and Dance* (1942)**

Gilbert's first collection of short stories was published by the Caxton Press in 1942. The stories had been written in the years 1940 and 1941 when Gilbert lived in Wellington. They are both a reflection of the time of the Depression, in their focus on the hardships that came along with the economic crisis, and a reflection of the human effect the Second World War

had on New Zealanders. The stories also reflect Gilbert's awareness of the discussions on literary criticism of the time—in that he has created a kind of creative criticism in his work.

Gilbert's short story "Story for a Xmas Annual" exemplifies his method of creative criticism especially well. Gilbert's mockery of fake regionalism indicates his awareness of Curnow's critical writing on this matter.⁸ His emphasis on exposing the hypocrisy of romanticised writing by stressing instead the harsh realities of contemporary New Zealand life with its particular difficulties, as posed by the Depression, indicates an equal awareness of his familiarity with Sargeson's critical views on subject matter. Out of these two issues Gilbert constructs a story which illustrates how the puritan myth of New Zealand being a pastoral paradise works, only to move on and interrogate this myth.

Gilbert's creative criticism is twofold in this story: in a prelude to "Story for a Xmas Annual" he explains to the reader that stories which use fake regionalism are completely and utterly hypocritical and indicate nothing about New Zealand life as it really is. The ingredients these "fashionable authors" (Gilbert 1942: 52) use are the New Zealand wilderness and the experiences of the pioneers. The hypocrisy, as Gilbert points out, lies in the fact that these authors would have no first-hand experience of this wilderness as they live in the cities and would not even enjoy contact with the pioneers they write about: "They [the authors] do not shake pioneers by the hand or offer them cigarettes, but the Maori words they use are invariably correctly spelt" (Gilbert 1942: 52). Since stories like these are successful, especially with readers in England, and enable the authors "to marry and buy a little bungalow etc." (Gilbert 1942: 52) Gilbert states tongue-in-cheek that he is going to write such a story himself since he too wishes to marry.

The explicit critique of the prelude finds its continuation in the actual story, through mockery of the fashionable author's romanticised vision of New Zealand pioneering times, and then moving the story on to *the real kind of literature*. But let us take a closer look at how Gilbert goes about this, as his technique is indeed well planned and carried out; he has found a way to bring his critical observations about in a manner which is enjoyable, rather than strenuous and demanding on the reader.

⁸ For instance "Rata Blossom vs. Reality" (1938) in Curnow's *Look Back Harder*.

In "Story for a Xmas Annual" Gilbert successfully encapsulates the entire colonial history of the country, thus doing what Sargeson praises Boldrewood for doing in *Robbery Under Arms* (see Sargeson 43). The starting point of New Zealand history in Gilbert's story is the birth and growth of a rata tree out in the bush as yet untouched by Pakeha pioneers. Here Gilbert mockingly employs all the exotic key words as described in the prelude: the landscape is characterised by "rimu", "huias", "rata flowers", "greenstone country" (Gilbert 1942: 52). The story progresses rapidly through time: pioneers arrive and start pulling the bush apart, mining and looking for gold, then farming the land. Here Gilbert focuses on one farmer in particular, though he does not give him a name: since he is used as a stereotypical example of a New Zealand pioneer, naming the man becomes superfluous. The stress does not lie on the characters or how things happen in detail, it lies on the progression, a kind of summary of historical events represented through the lives of these people, focusing ultimately on what capitalism and a malfunctioning economy do to them. The brief description of the farmer is part of exposing the New Zealand myth of being a pastoral paradise and showing that in reality life was not paradisaical but rather "[p]athetic fighting always smelling of stale milk, in out-of-date clothes, needing a hair-cut" (Gilbert 1942: 55).

The next part of the story is focused on the following generation, embodied by the farmer's son who moves into the city to find work, taking with him an offspring of the rata tree "because it reminded him of the old homestead and because he thought in a dumb kind of way that the crimson flowers were beautiful" (Gilbert 1942: 55). The man moves to Sumner, buys a house, plants the offspring, gets a wife and finds a job in a footwear-factory, only to lose it again. Thus Gilbert leads the story to the harsh present, the time of the Depression, which has the family suffering through lack of work, food, firewood, clothes and money. After having chopped up all parts of the house that can be used as firewood the wife suggests in a roundabout way that the husband should chop the rata tree down, as a last resort and sacrifice for the family's survival. The man, though reluctant, follows her advice. "And he knew that once he destroyed his tree he would wholly belong to the machine. The certainty of that was terrible" (Gilbert 1942: 56). With this knowledge but seeing no alternative, "he walked blindly forward and drove it [an axe] hard into the rata tree" (Gilbert 1942: 57).

Thus Gilbert turns the story into a political statement condemning the misery that in his view capitalism and industrialism—the embodiment of the secular puritan goal coupled with rapacious capitalism to make profit—have brought to the country. Gilbert also exposes the

truth that New Zealand is anything but a Pastoral Paradise, rather a place where men are forced to go as far as kill what they love most—forced to kill the symbol of hope in this case, and with it the illusion of a New Zealand utopia. It is in this last part of the story which is focused on the present that Gilbert broadens his narrative and allows for details such as the characters' thoughts and some dialogue. This makes the characters seem more real and three-dimensional to the reader. These latter characters thus stand in stark contrast to the flat paper cut-out characters that appear earlier in the story: the pioneering types whom Gilbert described in the prelude as merely being the product of the imagination of a certain type of author. This technique of employing contrast creates an image of Real versus Fake, or Truth versus Myth.

The Depression and the Second World War

In most of the short stories Gilbert uses the Depression and the war as means to overcome provincialism. Though Gilbert's approach may come across as naive it is certainly legitimate, approach, as it places New Zealand in relation to the rest of the world. The two main focal points in Gilbert's stories are the hardships the Depression has caused New Zealanders and the effects of the Second World War. Stories like "The Skater's Waltz and Two Bottles of Beer" and "Don't Wake the Dead" express a clearly pacifist attitude towards the war. This particular story is autobiographical, in effect about Gilbert himself and Joy, in love and succeeding in having a good time despite having very little money. The focus of the story lies on the two of them meeting at Gilbert's boarding-room to celebrate his buying a new record. Joy brings some beer for the special occasion and when she hands Gilbert his bottle he thanks her in German.⁹ He also tells her of the three other German words he knows, which are "wonderfully pretty", "happy" and the drinking toast "cheers". Joy tells him that he should not be using German words as they are at war with Germany, but Gilbert disagrees.

I am not at war with the German people or their language, he cried, the German people and the English people and the French people and the Dutch and Greeks and all the others and us in New Zealand. I love them all, I am at war with no people. They all have music and speak with words. . . . I am only at war with my enemies. Those who burn books, who have no pity and feeling for the earth's people, with the brownshirts and the hitlers and all the others who are only hooligans from street-corners. And there are plenty of them, he cried. (Gilbert 1942: 61f)

⁹ It should be noted that Gilbert got the German words slightly wrong. "Bitte" does not mean "thank you", it means "please" or "here you are". Also the spelling of the other words is slightly incorrect; they should be "wunderschön, glücklich, and Prosit".

What Gilbert is doing here, even though it comes across as naive, is putting the war into perspective. If we take Allen Tate's definition that the provincial man has cut himself off from the past and lives every moment as though it were totally new and had never been experienced by anyone before, then Gilbert is doing the opposite here, as he is able to see the bigger picture: wars happen, but it does not mean that the whole culture, present and past, is evil and must be condemned. Gilbert's choice of the German words underlines the fact that all humans share certain cultural values such as beauty, happiness, respect and wishing well. Their toast to "the great international music and to Beethoven and Wagner and Mozart" (Gilbert 1942: 63) fulfils a similar purpose: a country that has brought forth artistic people like these cannot be condemned as a whole, it is individuals who start a war and do evil. Implied is also the notion that evil exists not only abroad, but is possible everywhere, even here in New Zealand—a notion that collides with the myth of incorruptible Godzone.

Gilbert makes this point more explicitly in his story "Don't Wake the Dead": "one [nation]'s as bad as another" (Gilbert 1942: 26). The story is about a New Zealand soldier whose duty that night is to guard a petrol tank. To keep himself awake the soldier ponders about his role in the "war-machine" (Gilbert 1942: 24) which he rather glorifies despite his current useless duty. A man appears and asks the soldier not to wake the dead by marching up and down. The soldier takes this remark personally; however, the man is referring to all soldiers whose marching and fighting is waking the war-dead of the past.

Your footsteps are all over the world, said the man. Everywhere the dead are being forced to listen. It gets on their nerves when all they want is a little peace. (Gilbert 1942: 25)

The soldier is immediately on the defensive side and points out that the blame for the war does not lie with New Zealand. The man counteracts by replying that "one [nation]'s as bad as another" (Gilbert 1942: 26).

The structure of the story suggests that this statement is its central message, since afterwards the conversation turns towards who this man actually is who claims to be the messenger of the dead. By making the man the soldier's father who "fell gallantly at Passchendaele" (Gilbert 1942: 26) Gilbert uses the man as a symbol of humankind's past experiences—in this case the ones made in the First World War—which should be taken into consideration in order to avoid the repetition of mistakes.

The mistake addressed by Gilbert here is to look at the war as though there had been no war ever before, thus ignoring mankind's violent and quarrelsome nature. Implied is the message that one can learn lessons from the generations of the past—if one is willing. And the lesson in this instance is that mankind in general—thus including New Zealand—has a violent nature; a fact that needs to be accepted and dealt with. The soldier, however, is overwhelmed and scared and ends up shooting at the man who claims to be his father, thus indicating in effect that most people are provincial in that they refuse to learn from the past, using in this case "duty" as an excuse not to think for themselves. At the same time the central message, that everyone can make fatal mistakes, is confirmed.

Gilbert's method of reaching into the past of humankind to draw on the knowledge and experiences made before him by employing magical realism—the use of a ghost—is unusual for New Zealand writing of the time. However, it is a successful method, and can be termed post-provincial in its outlook as it anchors the New Zealander within a shared human history, thus negating the common local—and provincial—illusion that New Zealand is a place free of the violence and evil which is part only of the rest of the world.

Patrick Evans, in his discussion of John Mulgan's and Ian Cross' work, points out that

"[t]hese overseas wars are a part of the same process which produced the land wars and all subsequent conflicts, literal or figurative; all arise from a fundamental failure of morality and courage . . . Like Mulgan, Cross has seen in European civilization a germ of violence which has something to do with capitalism . . . ; but he has also recognized that New Zealanders failed early to realize the peaceful utopia which lay before them as a possibility, and that instead they maintained the very system which produced world wars and the wars of the world. (Evans September 1976: 255)

Gilbert's work suggests that he too was aware that this seed of violence was present in New Zealand soil. However, Gilbert's writing, in showing the reader possible causes and solutions, also suggests that he did not see it as too late to stop this germ from growing and spreading. Cross' conviction "that doctrines such as socialism or capitalism are divisive, and that only humanitarianism can unite by removing deception and myth" (Evans September 1976: 255) is mirrored in Gilbert's stories: Gilbert uses humanitarian arguments to promote peace. Gilbert's emphasis does not lie on converting his readers politically by showing capitalism as the cause of hardship, it is merely a form of social criticism, and the stress lies clearly on showing the human side. As Jones describes it, "[the] dissection of society, unlike that which emerged from the Depression in Australia or the United States, did not come from a Marxist critique of

socio-economic causes, but rather from a sympathetic study of the human effects" (Jones 1998a: 157).

The Man Alone motif

In the stories of *Free to Laugh and Dance* Gilbert carries out the dissection of society by portraying the situation of the individual in different circumstances, ranging from numerous versions of the unemployed (for instance in "Work for Hands", "Wellington", "The Lost"), or others that have fallen into what society would call a disgrace ("A Newspaper Tragedy"), to a murderer on the run ("A Girl With Ambition"). A common vehicle for many of these stories is the Man Alone figure.

Lawrence Jones explains that the Man Alone motif has been part of New Zealand literature not just since John Mulgan's novel of 1939, *Man Alone*, but since the beginnings of local writing. Originally, the Man Alone was a hero-figure, "acting out the society's pioneer values" (Jones 1998b: 331) in the form of a bushman, shepherd or miner, for instance. Round about 1930 a change occurred in the Man Alone figure: rather than supporting society's values, he became a victim of this society, and a rebel against society's values. It is this latter figure of the Man Alone, the individual in collision with society, that we find in Gilbert's writing.

Kirstine Moffat has identified a number of recurring patterns and tropes in the writing of anti-puritan writers. The two main categories are linked to the way in which the attack on puritanism is carried out, which is "either through the narrative of the individual rebelling against a Puritan upbringing or [through] the experiences of an outsider alienated from Puritan society" (Moffat 284). The category of rebellion can be linked with tropes such as the character's "inner division, the possession of two selves" (Moffat 284), change of location, often in a search for substitutes of the puritan inheritance, and outbursts of violence as a direct result of the restrictive puritan society (Moffat 285).

The second category, the alienated outsider, manifests itself in the Man Alone motif, a widely discussed phenomenon in New Zealand writing.¹⁰ The tropes linked with this category are the placement of blame for the individual's isolation on "the suffocating Puritan respectability of the middle class", as well as "a sense of solidarity between the down-and-outs, the men alone"

¹⁰ See Lawrence Jones. *Barbed Wire and Mirrors. Essays on New Zealand Prose*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1987.

(Moffat 285). Moffat writes that this kind of writing often features a pursuit in which the outsider is hunted by puritans who are determined to seize and punish anyone who refuses to conform, while the outsider is determined to keep his freedom (285).

The Man Alone featuring in Gilbert's stories tends to be a kind of voluntary social victim with a rebellious attitude—voluntary in that he sometimes chooses to suffer for his principles. For example, in the first story of the collection under discussion, "Free to Laugh and Dance", the first-person narrator tells of his skiing experience in Arthur's Pass which had him exposed to the cold, 5000 feet above sea-level. Staying in a rudimentary hut, fighting against the harsh elements, the narrator exults, "[a]lone on the snow you say sir to no man. . . . Not man against man with the odds even and dice unloaded, but man against God. . . . You don't say sir to God in the mountains" (Gilbert 1942: 10). The Man Alone takes the sense of freedom he has found in the mountains with him on his train trip home to the West Coast. Directly following his arrival there he is summoned to see his boss, the vice-chairman who is down from Wellington. "So carrying [his] skis and wearing boots and a three day's beard [he] was interviewed. . . . [and] got the sack" (Gilbert 1942: 11). He is not dismissed because of his appearance, though, but because he used offensive language. "He [the boss] called it profanity, I called it Elizabethan. It's from Romeo and Juliet, I said, but he wasn't interested in literature" (Gilbert 1942: 11). However, the Man Alone is content to lose his job, as it means keeping his freedom instead:

That's what was wrong with me—I had a job. You can't live while you work like that, while you have to arrive on time and practise conditioned reflexes six days a week, while you have to say sir to lousy snoots like the vice-chairman. I'm free now, free to laugh and dance and sing. (Gilbert 1942: 11f)

This story is a good example to illustrate Gilbert's attitude towards the reader: reading is meant to stimulate the reader to think about issues raised in the text, thus reflecting the same attitude about literature as portrayed in Pearson's article "Fretful Sleepers". In "Free to Laugh and Dance" Gilbert stresses that the freedom of the individual holds important value, even if it means loss of freedom in another sense—through the loss of financial security. The freedom to laugh and dance, in other words to enjoy pleasure, is very important. This is an idea which to the puritan mind would have seemed alien. By first creating an image the reader finds easy to relate to—the sense of freedom when skiing in the mountains—and then contrasting it to

the restrictions every-day life presents, and choosing one over the other, Gilbert suggests to his readers to ponder what is of importance to them.

The Man Alone in Gilbert's writing is not always a voluntary victim. In some cases, such as in "Girl With Ambition", the victim does not rejoice in his situation, in fact because he does not see any solution he resorts to violence. The actual violent act in this story, the murder of a pregnant woman, is not described as such. The reader merely gets told that the murder took place and that rumour has it that she might be buried underneath the playing-field the protagonist is working on. The killing took place in the past and is not referred to in detail. There is a certain level of ambiguity in this story, as the possibility that the protagonist is the murderer is only implied by the fact that he is the one telling the story. The protagonist's account provides a kind of framework consisting of seemingly disconnected episodes, leaving it to the reader to establish the links. The reader can only make these links and deduce meaning by asking questions such as: Why would the protagonist tell us about the waitress if she is not the one who was murdered? Why would he be so worried about putting his spade into her body when told to dig for it in the playing-field if he was not sure that she is buried there? Why would he escape from Wellington and go to far-away places if he was not worried that he might be hunted down? The fact that the story is the protagonist's account, told in an oral story-telling mode, is the only link between segments that actually suggests that there must be a connection, and that he is the murderer, being forced to kill the waitress because she became pregnant and he, being unemployed, not knowing how to feed her and the child. The story is a typical example of how Jones describes the Man Alone figure as being "a victim of society driven to violence" (Jones 1998a: 158).

It seems worthwhile pointing out that the oral story-telling mode employed in "Girl With Ambition" is similar to the one in Frank Sargeson's novella *That Summer*; and so is the idea of providing the reader with a rough framework and no explanations. Gilbert's story was published before *That Summer*, which could suggest that Gilbert and Sargeson both talked about this technique. Sargeson, however, managed to develop the technique much better, providing more props for the reader than Gilbert.

"Girl With Ambition" is set in Wellington in 1933 and tells of an unemployed man who is working on a relief scheme. As pointed out in the first chapter, people were angry at the way

the government was dealing with the effects of the Depression, and particularly at the punitive work schemes, and this impression is confirmed in this story:

The worst times New Zealand had struck, and all they could think of was to make playing-fields. They took great care to get the surface microscopically level and true—it took them and us months. Then they would decide to lower the whole thing six inches or so. It gave us work of course. If the slump had only lasted we'd have made all Wellington into playing-fields. (Gilbert 1942: 27)

The task given to the men working on the playing-fields is clearly a means of filling in time; it is nothing useful they are creating, not in the sense that it will help overcome the present economic situation, and fun and recreation are probably the last things on the minds of the unemployed who struggle to find enough money to support their families. And this is precisely the point Gilbert makes in this story, for the murder which he ends up running from is anchored in the dilemma of not being able to afford to keep a wife and a child, and not having hope that better times are ahead.

Another story of Gilbert's that Jones identifies as featuring the Man Alone pattern is "The Lost". In this story, according to Jones, the "various lost souls. . . cannot even make a gesture [such as violence] but simply suffer inarticulately from forces they cannot understand" (Jones 1987: 214). The story is divided into seven small sections that describe different versions and aspects of the lost: many unemployed walk the streets aimlessly "with deadness and sorrow in their eyes" (Gilbert 1942: 65), others express their hopeless situation in dialogue, which echoes the solidarity between the Men Alone Moffat refers to as a typical trope. Still others seek escapism at "the pubs and dances. . . bridge. . . stamp-collecting and ludo" (Gilbert 1942: 69). It is this kind of escapism that provides an immediate and temporary illusion of escape from the unpleasant situation, but Gilbert's story confirms what Sargeson had suggested in his critical writing: one needs to objectively face the problems of society to find a solution (see Sargeson 48).

Then there are the different lost in this story, the ones that suffer from society in a different way, like the suppressed homosexual who lives in denial about his true feelings, or "the boys of nineteen who drop bombs" (Gilbert 1942: 71). The story does not place blame on anyone—probably in order to avoid alienation of the reader—but simply asks fellow citizens to show empathy towards the lost and accept that their situation is determined by what seems

like fate and is not self-inflicted. Once the mistake of wanting to place blame on individuals in society is overcome, the real problems can be addressed.

You cannot escape by running. When you feel their eyes upon you do not shrink, but say, brother, you are like me, we have seen the same things, the same knock has come to our door. So far we have been lucky, but we need all our luck brother. Walk with me to the end of the street. . . . Your doom may be mine tomorrow (Gilbert 1942: 71).

In the stories discussed so far, Gilbert describes New Zealand society as a hostile environment not merely for individualists, but for most people, as the majority of New Zealanders was affected through the Depression, which is one of the major themes in Gilbert's stories. Gilbert's New Zealand is a society crippled by a collapsing capitalism. This implies a criticism of the puritan focus on making profit, and reveals this attitude as being ineffectual as it has brought the country nothing but misery.

Gilbert is not as severe an anti-puritan as Sargeson was. This has probably something to do with the fact that he did not face the same level of rejection as Sargeson, who as a homosexual was denied the expression of his sexuality altogether by law, whereas Gilbert could express his heterosexual ambitions. Another reason may be that Gilbert was employed most of the 1930s and was thus regarded as more respectable than Sargeson who was intent to be a full-time writer. Gilbert might also come across as less of an anti-puritan because of his focus on his audience: he tried not to alienate his readers by severely scolding their actions, but rather showing the negative effects and encouraging them to change their ideas.

If we reduce the puritan moral to a single phrase it would be "Do not indulge in pleasure!", and Gilbert's main focus, as suggested by the title of the collection, *Free to Laugh and Dance*, lies on converting the reader to value pleasure rather than condemn it. In his stories Gilbert repeatedly comments on the repressive attitude towards sexuality that is found in New Zealand at the time. His characters are clearly not sexually inhibited, and neither do they try to conform to other puritan standards, such as respectability through hard work. On the contrary, if it were not for the necessity of earning money, having no job would be the state to be desired, as it allows for total freedom. Gilbert most prominently focuses on the aspect of the hypocritical puritan attitude towards drinking. He points out that in order to be happy in New Zealand one constantly has to break the law—and most people do. The high ranking of pubs as the place for mainly male socialising in New Zealand society is demonstrated by the

fact that many of Gilbert's stories are set in or around a pub. It is the place where social interaction with mates takes place.

In the story "Adventure" the pub is a place of initiation to the adult world, thus indicating the central role public bars play in New Zealand culture. The pub is portrayed as a place for socialising, which includes having fun as well as leading serious discussions. The pub takes on the role of substitute church in that it is a place where people gather in a relaxed, non-prejudiced environment, and engage in reflective discussion, which can range from simple gossip to topics such as Shakespeare (Gilbert 1942: 74) and philosophical questions about life in general.

In "A Warning to New Zealand Fathers" two men have a drink in a pub and one tells the other about the dangers which capitalist greed, embodied by the cinema, can hold. The man is referring specifically to Hollywood films which give body to the capitalist dream by invoking hope for fame, success and becoming incredibly rich. The man's wife and daughter have gone to America spurred on by the belief that the daughter's resemblance to the fictitious child actress Jane Withers is promise enough for a successful career in the film industry. The daughter eventually does star in a film, but only after having sold her soul for money, and the family split in the process. While this story is another comment on the puritan goal of making profit, and the greed involved, it demonstrates that the pub, paradoxically, is a necessary part of New Zealand society, a substitute for going to church and a place where wisdom derived from personal experience, rather than a book with rules and regulations, is passed on.

In "I Love Leopards" Gilbert addresses the ambiguous attitude towards public bars in New Zealand. On the one hand puritan society condemns drinking and controls it through prohibition, and on the other hand the pub seems so important to people that they see no alternative but to break the law:

It was seven o'clock in the evening. They were sitting in the lounge of the Grand breaking the law. In New Zealand to be happy you must be continually breaking the law—if you drink after six o'clock it breaks the law. It is not as though you had robbed a bank of a million or murdered the mayor of your town. You just did it, you had to; naturally you wanted to be happy. (Gilbert 1942: 79)

Gilbert's portrayal of the pub stresses that it is not the drinking as such which makes people happy but the social interaction which takes place. Implied is the request to stop this

hypocrisy and make appropriate changes to accommodate for the needs of society. And a need it is, else people would not break the law to do it. The laws prohibiting drinking in public bars after 6 p.m. are a reflection of the very strict social order achieved through over-regulation.

Glass-sharp and Poisonous (1952)

While the stories in *Free to Laugh and Dance* may in part justify the claim that Gilbert was one of the sons of Sargeson, in that they share certain stylistic qualities, such as the oral storytelling mode, his novella *Glass-sharp and Poisonous* suggests that the son grew up and went his own way. This development might have had to do with his move out of the immediate circle around Sargeson by serving overseas in the airforce, as Gilbert claims in his introduction to the 1987 re-issue of *Free to Laugh and Dance*. While different in style, both works have in common that they address an intellectually and imaginatively interested readership—which consisted of a small group of middle-class men rather than the general public. The stories in *Free to Laugh and Dance* show Gilbert as an author who believes that writing serves the purpose of offering the reader enlightenment. Reading is meant to be entertainment, entertainment that at the same time stimulates the reader to think about the issues raised by the author. If that were not the case the author would not raise issues in the first place. In *Glass-sharp and Poisonous* Gilbert takes this idealist approach of involving the reader further by choosing the form of allegory—which has been around since the Middle Ages and is characteristically didactic in purpose, inviting the reader on a spiritual journey. The choice of allegory meant reducing the entertainment level—if we think of entertainment through easy access—as the reader was required to engage in hard mental work in order to allow interpretation.

By choosing to write an allegory Gilbert made a conscious choice to move away from the dominant literary mode of the time in New Zealand. The fundamental difference between realism and allegory is that the latter is non-mimetic in its subject matter. In allegory, the author's vision of the world is presented in a highly abstract form: people, nature and objects often are personifications of abstract concepts such as certain virtues and vices. The emphasis lies not in particular instances or thoughts of an individual, rather, on the individual acts as an example of the vision that stands behind it. Allegory typically stresses the unchanging nature of the world, and the people in it; repetition of certain instances occurs in different contexts to

illustrate the fundamental changelessness of humankind's virtues and vices. Themes such as the battle are employed to contrast such opposite forces within the allegory.

A brief outline of the fundamental changes that took place in allegorical writing illuminates the confused New Zealand reception of the novella, as illustrated later by Blackwood Paul's critique. Traditionally, medieval allegory offered its readers participation in a process of psychic redemption similar to modern psychotherapy. This process included phases of crisis, confession, comprehension and transformation. Allegory was thus reassuring in essence, confirming that comprehension and transformation are possible. After the end of the seventeenth century, however, a change occurred in that allegory "[went] underground": no longer was allegory the "advocate of conventional social values. . . [instead] it tend[ed] to become subversive, satirical, and concerned with the predicament of the rebel and the outsider" (Clifford 116). Allegory thus turned modern in its focus on the situation of the individual rather than the whole of society. The vision of the individual is often contrasted to a system that opposes and suppresses individualism. The modern allegory therefore no longer confirms conventional values, but questions and undermines them.

Gay Clifford points out that "[the] structure of the fiction is dominated or preceded by the ideological structure" (Clifford 7). The change in the purpose of allegory—to question rather than to confirm—is reflected in the structure and imagery, at the centre of which the reader is more likely to find a void than the affirmation of meaning and value. Considering the anti-puritan writers' vision of New Zealand that sees the individual as struggling against a threatening homogeneous society—as reflected by the Man Alone motif discussed earlier—the modern allegory seems an appropriate tool to express such a world view. Due to its highly abstract nature the allegory requires a reader who is willing to actively participate in the hero's intellectual journey. This involves breaking down the complexity of the allegory into its different layers of meaning. These layers are divided into aspects such as the allegory's episodic structure and a-temporal and non-chronological setting, as well as imagery, and symbolism, abstraction and personification. The analysis of an allegory thus requires much intellectual energy on the part of the reader, and to find an allegorical novella in New Zealand comes as a surprise, given that both Gilbert and the Caxton Press would have known that the readership available in New Zealand was unlikely to be appreciative or willing to engage in such efforts. Analysis of Blackwood Paul's critique shows that even an educated reader could struggle to comprehend Gilbert's work.

In his critique, which appeared in *Landfall*, Paul admits to "the possibility of a failure in [his] perception of the author's intention. If there is an allegorical significance informing the whole book and binding together the various themes it has eluded me" (Paul 247f). His fundamental problem seems to be that he is unaware of the changes allegory has undergone since the early eighteenth century. This becomes obvious when he describes the novella as calling upon the reader "to perform more than his proper function, not merely to discover but to invent links and profundities which will give meaning to the book" (Paul 248). However, he does consider the possibility that he might have failed as a reader, not Gilbert as a writer. His uncertainty about this is not only made evident by his earlier direct statement quoted above, but by his choice of words in other statements: "What *seems* [my stress] lack of precision in the allegory is paralleled in the style" (Paul 248). However, I will argue that it is precisely those details that Paul picks up on as weaknesses, such as the style, that in fact incur allegorical meaning, in the sense that modern allegories do by undermining order through non-conformity of structure.

The crucial mistake Paul makes is that he treats Gilbert's allegory as traditional, one which at its centre asserts values and meaning rather than disrupting and negating them. One such example is Paul's inability to fathom the significance of the different styles assigned to the different layers of narrative, which Gilbert uses to create the impression that his different episodes are created in different time-zones:

Mr Gilbert is successful in holding the interest—in a discontinuous narrative no mean achievement—but this odd mixture of style, now archaic, now high falutin, now journalistic and cliché-ridden, is not really well contrived to meet the needs of allegory. (Paul 248)

While on the one hand Paul admits uncertainty about the message of the allegory, on the other he goes as far as saying that Gilbert's "attention (or intention) fails and his style lacks the exactness necessary for his purpose" (Paul 248). This is contradictory because while having admitted earlier that he was unable to identify Gilbert's intention, in this quote he implies that he knows what it is, without further elaborating on it, however.

A close analysis of *Glass-sharp and Poisonous* will show that even though Paul did not notice it, Gilbert did indeed provide a carefully constructed framework of meaning in his work. And it is exactly those points highlighted negatively by Paul that can be described as the strong

points in constructing the text's message. This message is already referred to in the novella's prelude, which reads in part:

The search for the way and the life may be never ending. But he who searches with humility of spirit will discover a true path in the fusion of reality and illusion. (Gilbert 1952: 6)

Close analysis of the novella will suggest that the stress in these lines lies on the search as such, while Paul prematurely concludes that the novella will provide the reader with concrete answers. It is one of the characteristics of modern allegory that it undermines the reader's expectations of finding certainty and the affirmation of meaning in the text; instead, the reader may find a deliberately-created void at the centre of the allegory. Such a void holds meaning in itself and does not imply the failure of the author's intention, as Paul seems to think.

When analysing *Glass-sharp and Poisonous* one needs to bear in mind that allegory is an intricate web of metaphors, abstractions, imagery and personifications. The metaphor providing the framework in *Glass-sharp and Poisonous* is the journey, which symbolises life and the developmental process involved. The focus of the journey lies on humankind's quest for answers. While it provides the necessary frame to bind the story-line together, Gilbert has divided this metaphor into two main strands: on the one hand there is the journey of the individual in quest for personal freedom—freedom from the restrictive society the individual finds himself or herself in—and on the other there is the journey of the homogeneous society which aims for enlightenment, but ends in violent destruction. The latter journey is a pilgrimage which by definition is an act of religious devotion taking the pilgrims to a sacred place. Significantly, in *Glass-sharp and Poisonous* this sacred place is an asylum, suggesting the author's view of a sick society. Not surprisingly then, the devoted pilgrims turn into a blood-thirsty mob on their journey, killing a number of people who are guilty of nothing other than being creatively minded.

Gilbert illustrates the hypocritical nature of these pilgrims by focusing one strand of the allegory's episodic structure on a group of people who share a boarding-house. Their interactions and dialogues are used to illustrate the general nature of this society; one such example is Miss Saintly, whose name is clearly ironically chosen:

Divine counsel for a Divine King, thought Miss Saintly. O heavenly Being I love thee. I love thy inspired countenance and the glorious shine of thy features, thy high brow and

raven hair, thy spiritual austerity (but she longed O yes she longed for the joys of bed to be bounced breasted spread by a bricklayer in a park with the gates closed). (Gilbert 1952: 18)

The hypocrisy revealed here lies in the contradiction of the woman's thoughts, on the one hand suggesting puritan virtue and respectability, on the other undermined not only through the authorial comments in the brackets, but also later in her actions when she takes an active part in the violent outburst of the pilgrims' murder of Georg, Manzi and Vardov, three intellectuals who like music and literature (Gilbert 1952: 48f).

Other characteristics of this society are demonstrated by the people of authority. The official head of this society is an ailing King whose silence throughout the story suggests that the power he holds is hollow. In fact the real power is held by others in this society, particularly Doctor Vos, the man who is in charge of the asylum, a man whose scientific background suggests potential to be objective, yet who is blinded by power and greed. The King's poor state of health suggests that hierarchy being regarded as an outmoded form, a point reinforced when in the end he is killed. While it is one of the female outsiders of society that literally squashes the King, it is not the woman's intent to do so. Significantly, she is pushed off the Rock, which symbolises the obstacles that need to be overcome, in the act of climbing it. The surreal "little black man" (Gilbert 1952: 28) who does this, after she has almost succeeded in making her escape, is the personification of the evil that comes out of society itself, whose supernatural quality is illustrated in a healing session for the King. The pilgrims are gathered around him, and instructed by Doctor Vos to gather their kinetic energy in order to heal the King.

'And it will be necessary for the image of the King projected upon the mind to be at once solid and subtle. . .

'And now, here is a little formula which will help you concentrate. Repeat slowly after me:

*'In every way, in every thing,
Our aura heals our wounded King.'*

Quietly the crowd repeated the formula, and then silently concentrated on the liberation of kinetic energy. (Gilbert 1952: 79)

It is after this kinetic energy has been called for that the "little black man" appears, suggesting that society's energy is evil even when it tries to do good, and brings about the death of the King.

The pilgrimage of society at large, then, is signified by its illusionary nature. Gilbert's a-temporal arrangement of the two journeys suggests that they go in opposing directions, one leading to a dead end. This development can already be anticipated from the novella's prelude: "But whoever is ignorant, or proud, will find he has built a house without windows, and there, his own prisoner, will finally be destroyed" (Gilbert 1952: 6). The asylum, as the centre of this society, is such a house without windows, and the pilgrims are both ignorant in that they firmly believe that the Rock is glass-sharp and poisonous when it is not, and proud in their belief that they "are the greatest people in the world" (Gilbert 1952 :78). The journey that runs counterpart to the pilgrimage is undertaken by brave individuals, compared to "[w]ild birds [migrating]" (Gilbert 1952: 14), who actively attempt to break free from the system that holds them back. The woman climbing the Rock is one such example, and even though she dies in the process, by killing the King she becomes a martyr as well as a heroine. She stands as an example for all others willing to try, thus emphasising that the effort counts in itself, not just the result. This woman has escaped from the asylum, and while the reader does not learn anything about her as a person, she acts as living proof that it is an illusion to think climbing the Rock, thus actively overcoming obstacles, is impossible. The dangers involved in this journey to freedom are expressed through the Climbing Woman's death, as well as that of Manzi, Georg and Vardov, three young men who are killed because their imagination and intellect are perceived as a threat to society, as well as through the deaths of James' siblings in their attempt to reach the new world.

The journey that stands out from the others as being a success is the one made by James. He is the only one of the individuals seeking freedom to actually reach the place he intended to go: across the mountains.

'They say,' continued the woman, 'that it will remain dark until someone crosses the mountains and brings the sun back. That's what they say around here—a lot of nonsense . . . No one cares to try it anyway. The mountains are too high and it's safer at home even if it is dark.' (Gilbert 1952: 67)

This extract holds several symbolic meanings: for instance, the darkness symbolises the blinded vision of this society, which is equally oppressive as the pilgrim society on the other side of the mountain-range. The attitude towards crossing the mountains closely resembles the attitude towards the Rock held by the pilgrims: it is impossible because they choose to believe so, not because they know from experience. In fact, it is more convenient not to try at all. James and his sister cannot be deterred, though, and continue their journey into the mountains.

Like the woman climbing the Rock, James has to cross a supposedly impossible obstacle to achieve freedom. The close link between James' and the Climbing Woman's journey is reflected in the final episode when they meet: James reaches a slope leading to a cliff and connected to the cliff is the Rock. James almost manages to save the woman, who is trying to hang on to the cliff, but he is too late, the "strange little black man" (Gilbert 1952: 84) has got to her first. She falls and crushes the King, leaving the pilgrims howling in anger "like wolves" (Gilbert 1952: 85).

Then James smiled, for they [those thousands of people] were powerless. The rock was glass-sharp and poisonous—to them. He gazed out over the people and the blind hospital wall and the flowering plain, towards the rising sun. (Gilbert 1952: 85)

These final lines of Gilbert's novella stand in stark contrast to the place James left behind: he is greeted by the rising sun, the promise of hope to illuminate the twilight of the old place, which is a metaphor expressing the people's ignorance and blindness. It is thus James' journey that stands out as a triumph: he is the only survivor of the individuals, and the pilgrims have failed.

While the story seems rather open-ended in that James has indeed succeeded in doing the supposedly impossible, the reader may wonder what the meaning of this ending is, as James is still alone, standing on a plateau above the angry mob of pilgrims who blame him for the death of their King.

Symbolism in allegory is important, thus the sight of the rising sun as a symbol of a new beginning that stands in contrast to the constant twilight which dominated James' point of departure, is significant in that it stresses a positive outlook to the future. The other indication of the success of James' journey is revealed by the structural arrangement of the episodes that switch between James' journey, action near the Rock and in the Asylum, as well as the boarding-house, and the victims of the mob, Georg, Manzi and Vardov.

The fact that the two journeys are running against each other, not just in the action, but in the a-temporal structure, suggests the triumph of the individual's journey over the other. Even though the deaths suggest otherwise at first, it is the survival of one such individual, James, that is significant. Not only has he survived, but he has lived to grow old and tell the story to his grandchildren. The reader learns this not through the story's continuation but through the

narrative frame: the story is told in retrospect. The episodes involving James' journey are all briefly introduced by the narrator as being a story told by an old man to his grandchildren:

An old man was telling a story to some eager children clustered around his knee. The surroundings were homely, the old man kind and clean. The little ones, clad in bright print dresses were quiet and attentive, pleased with the world of their grandfather's imagining. (Gilbert 1952: 13)

However, whether or not the old man is in fact the aged James re-telling his own life story depends on whether the reader wants to believe so. By creating a snapshot contrast between the surroundings here—the house homely and the inhabitants well dressed—and the surroundings of the young James before he begins his journey for a better life, it is implied that there is a connection. This connection is hinted at again more explicitly, towards the end of the story, describing James' final strenuous efforts to make the crossing:

(How excited the old man was. He was marching up and down the room, as though he himself were James. His voice was strong and clear, and he gestured as he had told James was doing.) (Gilbert 1952: 83)

Gilbert thus does not openly confirm the possibility of change—but by creating ambiguity he leaves it to the reader to decide whether such a possibility exists or not. However, James' journey is only made possible because the force that drives him is hope, which he manages to keep till the end, even though it is severely tested—if the reader is an individual like James he will see that the message of the text is that hope and keeping the faith are what life is all about, and being brave enough to take risks in the process.

It is interesting to note that while Gilbert chose the setting for the story in southern Europe (Gilbert 1952: 10) both the scenery and subject matter give a strong sense of New Zealand. However, setting the story in a Europe that was at war at the time Gilbert was writing the book gives the story a wider context, suggesting that the elements of hypocrisy, ignorance and pride are to be found everywhere, and that the people pursued by oppressive systems should be courageous and not give up hope.

As has been illustrated, *Glass-sharp and Poisonous* is very complex despite its brief length of only 85 pages: its structure and imagery contribute as much to the book's meaning as dialogue and action. Through its allegorical mode the book is a highly literary form of art, and even

though the Caxton Press sold a total of 106 copies of *Glass-sharp and Poisonous* in just two days,¹¹ the overall reception, as suggested by Blackwood Paul's critique, was not encouraging.

While both the style and form of *Glass-sharp and Poisonous* were new to New Zealand writing, the subject matter, involving revealing society's hypocrisy, was not and in fact rather in tune with the New Zealand subject matter as can be found in Sargeson's critical writing. However, in order to understand that at the centre of the book lies the critique of society, the reader, as has been suggested, would have had to know how to approach the allegorical structure, and the imagery of personification and abstraction. Since this was not the case with the New Zealand readership of the day, Gilbert's efforts were lost on them.

Love in a Lighthouse

Gilbert's third publication, *Love in a Lighthouse*, shows him turning away from serious literature. The novel is autobiographical, capturing the time He, his wife Joy and son Miles spent in isolation from the rest of the world when he was employed as a lighthouse assistant. In the interview I conducted with Joy Gilbert in 1999 she told me that on Gilbert's return from the war there was no housing available for the family, so light-house keeping seemed a viable option, as the job came with the provision of accommodation. In November 1947 the family moved to Tiri Tiri Matangi, off the coast of Auckland, for a year. The book focuses on the difficulties encountered by the Gilberts, who were real townspeople, in having to live in such an isolated and rural setting. The book is light entertainment and written humorously.

The publication of both *Glass-sharp and Poisonous* and *Love in a Lighthouse* took years after completion. Gilbert's correspondence with Joy suggests that he had almost completed *Glass-sharp and Poisonous* by 1945¹² and the complete manuscript¹³ shows their address in Arrowtown, thus dating the completion to have taken place after 1948. The original manuscript of *Love in a Lighthouse*¹⁴ also suggests that it was written in Arrowtown, in other words during the years 1948 - 1953. The delay in publication was thus a matter of years, and illustrates that making a living out of writing was impossible. Gilbert might have thought that the publication of something that qualifies as easy reading, such as *Love in a Lighthouse*, would have been easier to publish. Having to find that this was not the case, and having to

¹¹ Cf. green folder entitled *Double Cash* held at the Caxton Press, Christchurch, for the dates 17 and 18 June 1952. This folder is the original one tracing all book sales of the Caxton Press.

¹² Cf. letter dated 28 December 1945, item 75, black folder, box 16, MB 957.

¹³ Cf. item 25, box 7, MB 957.

¹⁴ Cf. item 27, box 7, MB 957.

raise a family, might explain Gilbert's descent into literary silence, his focus turning to providing the family with financial security through steady employment.

The connection between Denis Glover and the publication of Gilbert's work is worthwhile acknowledging. Both *Free to Laugh and Dance* and *Glass-sharp and Poisonous* were published by the Caxton Press, when Glover was in charge of this publishing house. In 1956, when *Love in a Lighthouse* was published by Pegasus Press, Glover was no longer at the Caxton Press but in charge of the Pegasus Press. One can therefore conclude that it was due to Gilbert's connection to Glover that he got his work published at all.

Chapter 3

Gilbert Unpublished

Gilbert's life illustrates how hard it is to establish a literary career, and particularly how hard it is to re-establish such a career after a long break spent doing other things. As he points out in the first part of his unpublished autobiography "A Reading Writing Man", he faced rejection from the very start: "I could have . . . papered a small room with the rejection slips I received" (147). The problems he encountered with the publication of his other works, reflected through years of delay, made him turn away from the idea of being a full-time writer, a decision further impelled by the need to support his family financially. Speaking of himself in the third person, he admitted that the move away from Auckland probably did not help his cause: "Besides, he had physically dropped out of sight as well. He withdrew first to Tiri Tiri lighthouse then to isolated Central Otago hamlet of Arrowtown, and finally (and perhaps unforgivably) back into the Air Force." (Gilbert 1987: xvi). At a time when becoming established as a writer relied so much on making the right personal contacts and getting to know fellow-writers, his decision to shift to an isolated island, and later to Arrowtown, did nothing for him.

Thirty years were to elapse before he could afford to return to his original dream of being a full-time writer. Since so little is known about his life during that thirty-year period and because the work he eventually managed to write after its end has an intermittent autobiographical element, I will supply some details about it here derived from both his autobiographical writing and the conversations I had with his wife not long before her death (cf. Jasmin Brandt "Interview with Joy Gilbert; Lincoln, 9 July 1999". Unpaginated. In the possession of the author). These made it clear that his first move away from Auckland in the early post-war period was not voluntary but dictated by the need to find somewhere to live amid the post-war housing shortage. When he returned from service in the R.N.Z.A.F., housing in Auckland was so scarce that taking the lighthousekeeper's job he was offered, with accommodation provided, seemed like a good option. After a year on the island of Tiri Tiri Matangi (during which time he and Joy were visited by Sargeson), the Gilberts left to travel the country for three months, sleeping rough and moving from town to town. When they

reached Arrowtown, far to the south, they fell in love with the beautiful landscape and decided to settle there. It was 1948.

Gilbert's intention was to write full-time in his tiny adopted town. But although it was easy enough to do this, publication was to prove difficult to find, and with only a small income from his father's inheritance and a family now of five to support, he had to find work to pay his bills. He did odd jobs and also worked part-time at the local shop, taking time off to hitch-hike up to the writer's conference held at Canterbury University College in May of 1951, where he features in a photograph taken in one of the lunch-breaks, wearing a heavy jacket as he stands amidst the likes of Baxter, Glover and his old friend Anton Vogt.¹⁵ Sargeson was present too, and was persuaded to return to Arrowtown to stay with his younger friends. He became so enthusiastic about the place that he decided he would start a writers' commune there.

He [Sargeson] spoke enthusiastically of forming a sort of writer's colony where subsistence and literary effort would flourish side by side. He was, I fear somewhat misled by Joy's enthusiasm. He was brought down to earth again when, after expressing a wish to dig our garden for us, he jarred his arms and found that the soil was frozen for about 200 mm down. He decided against emigrating to Central Otago and chided Joy and I on our wish to live like peasants. He saw it, correctly, as another of our youthful illusions. (Gilbert, "The Good Friend" 5)

In 1953, after five years in Arrowtown and without a single work he had written there having been published, Gilbert abandoned his dream of emulating Sargeson as a full-time writer and rejoined the R.N.Z.A.F.. Here he worked with radar, signals and radio, and during the following years received several promotions, the last in 1960 to Flight Lieutenant. During this time he was stationed in various places throughout New Zealand, but from 1955 his home base was Lincoln, on the southern outskirts of Christchurch. In 1965 he was a United Nations military observer and peace-keeper in India and Pakistan for a year. On his return to New Zealand in 1966 he took retirement leave, enrolling in Religious Studies at the University of Canterbury. In 1968 he became publications officer at the New Zealand Agricultural Engineering Institute at Lincoln.¹⁶ In 1980 he retired, and was able to return at last to his old passion.

"A Reading Writing Man" (1980s).

¹⁵ Cf. photo on page 274 in Gordon Ogilvie. *Denis Glover: His Life*. Auckland: Random House, 1999.

¹⁶ Cf. item 21, box 6, MB 957 for Gilbert's employment history.

One of Gilbert's first projects was to write his autobiography, which he continued to do amongst his other projects until his death, by which time he had accumulated two separately-titled parts, the first written in the 1980s, the second in the early 1990s. The first, "A Reading Writing Man", covers the period 1921 to 1936, starting at age four-and-a-half when Gilbert became "literate" and taking the reader up to his twentyfirst year.

The main problem with Gilbert's autobiographies is that of his later imaginary work: he goes off on tangents, emphasising aspects of his life that do not seem particularly exciting or worthy of mentioning. He is describing a life lived on the South island's West Coast, after all, but his inflated approach manages to get him 249 pages out of it, parts of it mildly amusing and entertaining to read, but others – for example his extended descriptions of how exactly he was taught to read and which books he read in his teens – stupefying, interesting only for people of Gilbert's own generation, perhaps, who might have recognised details from their childhood and shared his nostalgia for the past. This, however, makes for a very restricted readership and explains why the work has not been published. "A Reading Writing Man" becomes more interesting towards its end, though, when he describes his time as an apprentice at the Westport Customs Office (1932 - 1936), an occupation which he passionately disliked and which he consequently had to find ways of distracting himself from. He shows one such distraction occurring when he browsed the Customs Manual, one of his tasks:

I found that right at the end of the Manual there were a number of appendices and one of these was headed Prohibited Publications and this Appendix immediately became my favourite reading when I was studying the Manual. . . . then I had my only truly great idea in which the profit motive was tied in with an abuse of confidence and betrayal of trust as a servant, in the development and application of that idea I became a real capitalist I pored over this idea of mine when I should have been memorising import duties and other important customs information and nursed it along and carefully analysed it for dangerous anomalies. Then I approached my father I wondered whether my idea was such a good idea then for would my father, who was a man of strict (if narrow) moral beliefs, respond well to being invited to order 'spicy' books, that is 'suggestive' books, . . . books which the customs authorities with their lofty moral outlook had decided should not be imported into New Zealand. (Gilbert, "A Reading Writing Man" 123f)

Gilbert's father was the local dentist in Westport, but he also owned a shop that sold miscellaneous items, including books. Gilbert, who had been an avid reader since a very early age, had taken on the position of book expert, his responsibility being to choose and order the books to be sold in the shop. He now offered to his father the idea of ordering "interesting" books which could then be sold "under the counter":

I was offering my services as a procurer, I was betraying my employer, the Government of New Zealand, and even worse than all of that I intended to debauch the minds of the honest West Coasters for profit, to encourage them to have dirty thoughts and even indulge in dirty acts. To my surprise my father agreed. (Gilbert, "A Reading Writing Man" 126)

As has been described in an earlier part of this thesis, the Customs Office was also the place that drove Gilbert to write, as a kind of self-prescribed therapy to deal with his boredom and the frustration of the workplace—the occurrence of which he saw as his transition from a mere reading man to a reading and writing man (cf. Gilbert, "A Reading Writing Man" 132-149).

"Reading Writing and Revolution" (1990s).

This second part of Gilbert's autobiography overlaps somewhat with the first, as for the first 47 pages it is still set on the West Coast, only then turning its focus to Gilbert's move to Wellington in 1936 and his new-found sense of freedom in what he describes as his "political period" (1),

when [he] believed that man (meaning the whole human race . . .) was a 'political animal' and that the whole world could be saved by taking the right political action. [He] really did believe then that man was born free but was everywhere in chains. After 1940 I came to believe, as I still do believe more or less, that man was not a 'political animal' at all but generally speaking. . . , just an animal, or indeed, a failed animal. (Gilbert, "Reading Writing and Revolution" 4)

He outlines how he came to be of a communist conviction while still living on the West Coast, and how he would have heated arguments with his father, which would usually see the younger Gilbert burst into tears (cf. 10).

But, ah, in the years 1930 to 1940 I was fierce in my denunciations of 'the capitalist bosses' and loud in my calls for revolution. I was at one with the watersiders and the miners in my demands for the 'general strike', that instrument of revolution. (Gilbert, "Reading Writing and Revolution" 10).

Apart from telling us about Gilbert's personal development as he saw it, this part of the autobiography gives interesting insights into life on the West Coast between the two wars. For instance, he describes quite humorously the division between the Protestants and the Catholics:

'A Mick will always get a job if there's one going,' my father observed for he subscribed

to the universal Protestant notion that the Catholics were closely organised by the hierarchy and that there were 'Catholics in high places' who 'helped their own'. Into the bargain all the Westport Catholics were fervent supporters of the Labour Party and were indeed, so it was said, instructed how to vote 'from the pulpit'. (Gilbert, "Reading Writing and Revolution" 30)

A big influence on Gilbert's political conviction was a woman called Agnes Costello, who was a schoolteacher and a convinced communist. Gilbert, in the fashion of "Energy Island" explores her entire family background. Twenty pages later, in section six, he returns to where he left off in the first part of his autobiography: his transfer to the Wellington Customs Department in 1936, recreating his horror when faced with his new working environment for the first time:

The Statistics Section, . . . to which I was escorted much as a condemned criminal would be taken down to the place of punishment, was a place of horror, . . . even though almost sixty years have passed, my reaction is still one of horror, . . . again I can hear the frightful clash and slam of the giant adding machines as the sounds of their mechanical grinding and clanging echoed off the brick and plaster walls of the stats hall. I could hear the clatter and crash generated by these mechanical monsters from well down the corridor and there, in the great stats hall (or 'hell') of the Head Office of the Customs Department I was fed to the machines. (Gilbert, "Reading Writing and Revolution" 49f)

It was while Gilbert was working in the "hell" of the Customs Department that he discovered the writing of Franz Kafka (53ff), which he not only greatly admired but also identified with:

After I had read The Trial I had seen at once that K. . . . and I were both victims. K. was accused of some mysterious crime never made known to him but for which he would in the end be executed 'like a dog'. In my case, which was illuminated by the pronouncement of the Red Queen . . . I was now 'serving my sentence' before committing the crime for which I would later be tried and condemned. My brutal incarceration in the stats hall chained to a giant adding machine was a just penalty handed down for some crime I was yet to commit. (Gilbert, "Reading Writing and Revolution" 55)

The move to Wellington opened new worlds to the reader in Gilbert because the capital offered a variety of bookshops such as "Modern Books, the centre for Popular Front Literature, which stocked the entire output of the Left Book Club" (56), the Trades Hall bookshop and Carmen's bookshop (60), which Gilbert eagerly explored. Treasures he found were a copy of W. H. Auden's poem *Spain*, which he stole, and James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, which he recognised "from [his] study of the lists of prohibited books in the Appendix to the Custom's Manual [as] probably the most prohibited book in the list" (64). Gilbert could not resist buying "a copy of that prime prohibited book" even though the cost of it would "leave [him] dreadfully short, no trams, no pictures, no razor-blades" (67). The book engaged Gilbert for three entire months, during which

[he] thought 'Joyce-think' and . . . spoke (to [himself], mainly) 'Joyce-speak' and [his] life was lived within the Joycean universe so that [he] saw everything from a Dedalian viewpoint or from within the Bloomsian stream-of-consciousness. (Gilbert, "Reading Writing and Revolution" 71)

There is probably no more important account of the impact on a new Zealander of the time of the world of *Ulysses*. It provided Gilbert with a place to escape from "the giant adding machines which 'were driving [him] mad'" (71), till he is discovered to be astigmatic and removed from the adding machine, having instead to check his colleagues' figures for mistakes. Despite this escape he was still not entirely happy in the Customs Department and, being out of his father's reach, decided to look for a job he would enjoy, applying and being accepted for the position of a junior technician in the Broadcasting Department, so leaving the Customs Department forever in November 1937 (cf. 77).

As has been mentioned earlier, it was through the broadcasting that Gilbert met and became friends with Anton Vogt, and thus kept his focus on writing active. The last section of this part of the autobiography concentrates on his friendship with Anton Vogt, and how they kept in touch over the years. Amongst this detailed description there is also a small account of Gilbert's memory of the 1951 writers' conference in Christchurch:

In 1951, with our adobe house [in Arrowtown] still not quite finished, I travelled up from Arrowtown to Christchurch. . . . I wanted to see all my friends who would be attending the Writer's [sic] Conference, even including Frank who would be persuaded not only to attend the Conference but to complete a literary progress which extended as far south as Invercargill and included a short stay in our still rather unfinished adobe house. . . . I saw Tony [Anton Vogt] at the Writer's [sic] Conference for he was now well known as a writer and a writer's advocate and a poet of wit and distinction. . . . Now he was successfully encouraging a rising generation of writers which included the young James Baxter who gave the . . . keynote address to us writers gathered there in one of the larger lecture rooms of Canterbury College. How enthusiastically we received that stirring address and yet I cannot now recall a word of it, all I can recall now is the image of a short young person with a rather large nose whose limp sports coat hung on him or rather off him, standing alone on the dais, not much higher than the lectern he was, who raised us 'mature' writers to a quite rare pitch of enthusiasm with his oratory, but although I have entirely forgotten of what he spoke it seemed fine fiery stuff at the time and was most invigorating and uplifting for me to hear for Arrowtown was not the best of places from which to keep in touch with the literary scene. (Gilbert, "Reading Writing and Revolution" 104f)

It is unfortunate that Gilbert, instead of finishing work on his autobiography when he started it in the 1980s, shifted his emphasis to writing his fiction, as an account of his friendship with Sargeson and his involvement with the writing scene around Sargeson in the 1940s would

have been invaluable and interesting. Instead, the last part of the autobiography trails off into a dialogue between him and Joy as they reminisce about the old days before switching back to 1937 and a discussion of the differences between Gilbert and his father, who gave him a scolding for having abandoned his financial security by changing jobs. Even though this second part exists in printing-copy quality (cf. item 11, box 4, MB 957) it seems unfinished.

"The Descent Into Silence" (1984)

Gilbert admits in his autobiography that he had always secretly regarded himself as a writer:

I have always secretly thought of myself as a 'writer', even though it is only now, in the years of my old age that I describe myself as 'writer' on the occasional official form I am still required to complete. I have, as they now say about the various sexes, or should I say, genders, come out of the closet. (133)

This fairly accurately sums up Gilbert's anonymity at the time he retired and returned to the career he had originally desired: not many people, not even those who knew him in Lincoln in the 1980s and 1990s, were aware that he was writing again—indeed, none of them even knew he had ever been published. He seems to have become unknown to a new generation of local academics, too, who, embarrassingly, had to be reminded of his existence by an outsider, the Canadian literary critic, W. H. New, who rehabilitated him in his *Dreams of Speech and Violence: The Art of the Short Story in Canada and New Zealand* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) by writing him back into the history of New Zealand literature as one of the new "group of writers whose work began to appear in the 1940s and 1950s" (154) and describing his "experiments with participial constructions" which "took his sketches away from fixed conclusion and into the shifting mood effected by image and cadence", mentioning particularly Gilbert's story "Wellington, 1940" in *Free to Laugh and Dance* (158).

But until New's book appeared, Gilbert remained forgotten as a fiction writer. His first effort to emerge from this oblivion was "The Descent Into Silence", an attempt to write a full-length popular novel on a Cold War theme, nuclear annihilation. Set in the late 1940s, it focuses on a New Zealand left increasingly isolated by a nuclear war which has destroyed the rest of the world, and concentrates on the effects of this enforced isolation. The narrator, who tells this story in retrospect, is an old man whose biographical details closely resemble those of Gilbert himself during the 1930s to 1950s. He describes the rapid deterioration of New Zealand civilisation into chaos and its occupants into brute savages. Riots take place so frequently that the authorities give up trying to keep order. People vacate the towns that are left behind

destroyed by raids and fires. The New Zealand Army decides to create a new order and move to Ohakea to build a base for its people. The protagonist, as a member of the intelligence, joins the army and moves to Ohakea. In contrast to the rest of society that has reverted to cannibalism, the army manages to keep strict order and control over its people, resulting in the creation of a dictatorship with laws of its own. After two years at Ohakea the protagonist asks permission to leave, and eventually is flown to the West Coast and dropped off on his own. Here he makes his way through the wilderness and encounters people who speak in Biblical language and have generally returned to the life of the Middle Ages. There are various religious tribes, one of which the protagonist is obliged of necessity to join:

We became known as the JJs, the Joyjums, the Jayfers, the Jesus Jumpers for others came to see that we rose as did our Saviour on that blessed third day but that, unlike Him, being sin-filled creatures, we fell back onto this imperfect earth. (314)

The protagonist stays with the JJs, having given up hope that he will ever find a life that resembles what it once was. In the fifteen years that have now passed since "the silence fell" (2) literacy has fallen away, and as the only adult who can read and write he is assigned the role of "the Keeper" (3). But he fears the student he is assigned, to whom he must teach literacy skills, in case he replaces him in due course. The conclusion is elegaic, as he imagines Lalita, a Fijian girl with whom he fell in love when working in Suva for four years as a young man and whom he has never been able to forget:

Today, this evening perhaps, as the sun sets, Lalita will permit me to follow her. I see her every day. Each day I fancy she comes a little closer, remembering, I hope, her promises made to an old man. (334)

The longing expressed in those last lines suggests that he is preparing for his death, the only way in which he might be reunited with her. In contrast to *Glass-Sharp and Poisonous*, written all those years ago, the ending here suggests no hope for the improvement of the world.

A lot of this will be familiar to readers of published New Zealand fiction of the 1970s, which registered world events more emphatically than at any time since the Second World War, and seems to have reacted particularly strongly to the war that had been occurring in Vietnam throughout the 1960s and to 1975. Janet Frame's novel *Intensive Care* (1970) imagines a futuristic New Zealand that has been taken over by United States troops to enforce a kind of dystopian normality; it ends apocalyptically, with bodies being burned *en masse*. C. K. Stead's

Smith's Dream (1971) imagines a similar scenario, with foreign troops enforcing a local dictatorship. Michael Henderson's *Log of a Superfluous Son* (1975) takes its New Zealand protagonist north, to the war zone. Peter Hooper's *A Song in the Forest* (1979) is even more closely linked in theme to Gilbert's novel: what seems to be a stone-age setting, in which a well-ordered tribe of primitives have made a sort of pre-Polynesian society, is slowly revealed, when the protagonist travels across a blasted plain and through the ruins of a city the reader slowly realises is a Christchurch that has been levelled some time before in a nuclear blast, as in fact set in a post-apocalyptic future. Mike Johnson's novel *Lear* (1986) is a later contribution to this post-nuclear genre, which probably originated in the British-Australian writer Nevil Shute's novel, *On the Beach* (1957), which was made into a popular film (1959) and which, of the works mentioned here, Gilbert's novel most closely resembles in theme. Like the Second World War, nuclear annihilation was obviously a popular topic as long as it was confined to paper. Gilbert's main problem was that he got it onto paper long after everyone else.

A further problem is that, in all truth, his version was considerably inferior to the others. There is no doubt that he is fully engaged with the work he is writing, and that some of it has the quality of being fully imagined:

'We may go', she said. She spoke her farewell to the Goddess [Kali, consort of Siva] and uncouth and self-conscious Kiwi though I was, I bowed to that dark idol. I would have kneeled or crawled. The air was insufferably hot and close and reeked of the smouldering incense. . . . Outside the decaying gate with the red earth, the scattering of green trees on the easy slope which ran towards the distant improbably blue sea I—as they say—came to myself. Waves of nausea flowed over me. I released Lalita's hand and, discreetly moving away, I vomited my heart out. . . . We got into the taxi and then left it not far into town. Among the houses and gardens of Suva we walked slowly, close together, fingers linked, although a strange sense of detachment filled me. But there was no sense of separateness [sic]. This was not love—the word was quite inappropriate. There was an identity. 'I am beloved of Daksinakalika, John. She is the Mother of us all although she destroys us all. I gave you over to her. You felt her power, her presence. Perhaps she will protect you from other harms until she destroys you. This is her age. Today she is everywhere. You are a fortunate one to know her as the Mother.' Lalita left me to go home. Our hands drew apart slowly. We smiled. I dawdled back to my office. . . I felt fit for nothing. I was not myself, not indeed would I ever be fully myself again. (36f)

It is in the description of John Granson's time in Suva that the story is actually alive; the characters interact. Most of the remaining novel is static and evolves around the protagonist's monologues. His partner is Patsy, who is just about the only other character who gets to put a word in here and there—and only on a superficial level, as one never learns her thoughts and feelings other than they are assumed through the protagonist, who admits about himself that

he has a pretty empty life: "I had no wife, no family, no deep emotional engagement, no deep beliefs even that could be shattered" (215). Granson leaves Patsy when he discovers that she no longer needs him in the new order at Ohakea, having risen in rank and threatening to overtake him in her success because she is useful in her practical skills, teaching people how to climb (212). In the usual contradictory Gilbert manner, however, the protagonist makes a lengthy confession to Patsy, telling her that he has shed the past and is no longer afraid of the future, which must be taken a minute at a time, no more planning ahead—and yet his carrying on with life has no spark in it, just melancholy about the world that is lost (217ff). This contradiction is at the centre of the novel's plot and works against it, as on the one hand the protagonist exclaims "I'm freed for ever from the past" (217), yet on the other hand he constantly returns to the memory of Lalita and his longing for her—Lalita being representative of the old world.

There are also stylistic lapses, for instance when Gilbert, for no apparent reason, changes from the past tense to the present tense for two whole pages (246f). The main problem, however, seems to lie in his inability to focus on the actual plot, which seems secondary to describing the practical difficulties society faces under the new circumstances. One such example is Gilbert's lengthy description of how problems of rubbish disposal, sewerage and water supplies are taken care of (cf. 220-223):

The original plastic bag collection had continued for about four months using up the stocks of backs [sic] commandeered from other local sources. Rubbish tins were historical. The solution to rubbish disposal was simple, a sort of non-solution. We were all made responsible for our own refuse. Official rubbish was made the responsibility of section commanders. The householders dug holes in their gardens or if they thought themselves above such servile work, they paid for the holes with a few cans of beans or milk. Wing Commanders and above could apply for holes to be dug for them. . . . (Gilbert, "Descent into Silence" 220)

This hardly makes for interesting reading, with its lack of dialogue or direct action to illustrate the new life. There is a strong sense throughout that Gilbert was more concerned with getting the facts right about life after nuclear annihilation rather than with creating a good novel. This impression is confirmed when one reads his correspondence with Dr Wren Green, who in 1987 wrote a government-commissioned study of the possible effects of nuclear war on life in New Zealand, which was reported in the *Press*.¹⁷ Gilbert sent Green a copy of "Descent into

¹⁷ Cf. *The Press*. "N.Z. N-plan lacking". Oliver Riddell. 24-08-87

Silence" to get his expert opinion on how realistically he had portrayed such a nuclear outcome for New Zealand, seeking ultimately

a sort of reference. . . that [he] could pass on to the publishers—some sign that [his] fiction and [Green's] facts are not too far apart and that those reading [his] novel might acquire one or two insights into the dire possibilities of a massive nuclear exchange in the northern hemisphere. In other words, that the novel has value apart from being . . . a good read (cf. letter to Wren Green dated 28-08-87, items 18, box 6, MB 957).

After four months Gilbert received a positive reply from Green, affirming the accuracy of "the myriad disruptions New Zealand would face in the event of nuclear war" (cf. letter to G. R. Gilbert dated 17-12-87, items 18, box 6, MB 957). Green, however, did have some criticism to make about the actual story; for instance, he "had difficulty with . . . the apparent rapid acquiescence of the population to hardship without much effort to improvise and organise in the great (mythical?) Kiwi fashion" (cf. letter to G. R. Gilbert dated 17-12-87, items 18, box 6, MB 957). Yet Gilbert disagreed with Green and sent a lengthy reply in attempt to justify himself:

My narrator can only speak from his own experience and that, because of the emerging deprivation, is very limited. Perhaps, only 100 km or so away, the archetypical [sic] Kiwi is improvising and organising in small isolated but democratic communities or even leaderless groups. However I doubt it. (cf. letter to Wren Green dated 19-01-88, items 18, box 6, MB 957)

While it makes sense that Gilbert would have approached Green to seek evaluation from a scientist to confirm the scientific realism of his work, it is a little unexpected that Gilbert would have taken Green's literary criticism so seriously, which he could have just dismissed as being not in his field of authority. However, he had always stressed the importance of "readerly" response, and Green was nothing if not a reader, one whose criticisms are easy enough for a fellow-reader to agree with, as it must be said that the deterioration of society in Gilbert's novel is shown to take place so easily and without apparent reason that ultimately the text lacks the power to convince. One finds it hard to imagine that society would make no effort at all to withstand succumbing into chaos and savagery.

"The Descent into Silence" is so flawed a work that Gilbert's decision to submit it for publication calls into question both his practical judgement and the quality of his literary sensibility. It was rejected in turn by John McIndoe Ltd, the Dunedin company which had published Peter Hooper's novel, Hodder & Stoughton, and Penguin Books. John McIndoe

Ltd's letter of rejection, sent in September 1986, gives the most detailed and sympathetic reply, stressing that the

manuscript obviously has very considerable merits. . . . [.] is very competently written, with an articulate and fluent style, a strong though simple construction, vividness and authenticity of detail, and the characterisation is no more perfunctory than one would expect in this genre. (Letter to David Garvin¹⁸ dated 24-09-1986, item 18, box 6, MB 957)

However, John McIndoe Ltd does point out a number of weaknesses, such as "bad lapses in style and register", as well as in its language, "as if the author had lost confidence both in his own voice and in the identity of his audience" (letter to David Garvin dated 24-09-1986, item 18, box 6, MB 957). It is stressed, however, that despite these lapses the manuscript is considered "deserving of publication, and could well have considerable success"—the reason why John McIndoe Ltd rejected the manuscript for publication lay primarily in the fact that they were already publishing another novel which was allegedly similar in theme to Gilbert's (letter to David Garvin dated 24-09-1986, item 18, box 6, MB 957). John McIndoe Ltd were also doubtful that the New Zealand Literary Fund would support the publication by a grant, and lastly, "[they felt] that the work [didn't] quite fit [their] programme" (letter to David Garvin dated 24-09-1986, item 18, box 6, MB 957).

Gilbert replied to John McIndoe Ltd in December 1986, again writing under the pseudonym "David Garvin (editor)", informing them that Gilbert gladly received their advice and made editorial changes to his manuscript: "an intermittent failure on the part of the author to keep his proper distance. The author got in the way of the narrative and quite unjustifiably used the narrative for his own purposes. Gilbert hopes that his editing has resulted in a more readable narrative" (letter to John McIndoe Ltd dated 22-12-86, item 15, box 5, MB 957). About this time Hodder & Stoughton's replied to him with a standardised rejection:

Thank you for thinking of us, but I regret to say that it is not really the kind of novel we publish and, in addition, our fiction list is fully committed at present (letter to David Garvin dated 02-12-86, item 18, box 6, MB 957).

Half a year later Gilbert received a rejection from Penguin, which also pointed out that his work did not fit their programme, and that they could only publish a very small proportion of all the manuscripts they received.

Apart from the question "The Descent into Silence" invites about Gilbert's literary judgement, there is the related question whether the relatively ready availability of Caxton's publishing structure and the advocacy of Sargeson and Glover as friends and mentors had magnified Gilbert's talents in the early post-war period, and if so, to what degree. Certainly, the New Zealand literary environment he returned to from about 1980 was completely changed from that earlier time. Glover died in that year, and Sargeson a couple of years after that. The Caxton Press, while still in business as a printer in Victoria Street in Christchurch and still associated with *Landfall*—at this point going through a rather complicated stage of its existence—was no longer the friendly combination of mateship and industriousness it had once been. Its nearest counterpart as a local publisher promoting local publications was the Dunedin company John McIndoe Publishers, which had a particular interest in South Island writers, especially those nearest to it; but this firm was to publish less and less local writing after the departure of its publisher Brian Turner in 1989. The other two firms to whom Gilbert submitted the typescript of "The Descent Into Silence", the Auckland-based Penguin Books and Hodder & Stoughton, were far more typical of the large, rather faceless international conglomerates which were taking over the New Zealand publishing scene as a part of the globalisation of the world economy. In the context of this sophisticated level of publishing, Gilbert's work has to be admitted to look rather clumsy and amateurish, his earlier achievement perhaps more dubious than had seemed on publication.

It is obvious that, bad as it in fact is, Gilbert made a considerable investment in "The Descent into Silence" and expected, or hoped, that it might be accepted by a publisher for profit, as a sign of his return to committed authorship, and as the prelude to a late but significant "second career" like Sargeson's. The effect of its serial rejections can be imagined, though as late as March 1988, in a letter to the publisher Christine Cole Catley, he was able to mingle an awareness that times had indeed changed with an unquenched, if rather plaintive, hope that she might be interested in reading, and publishing, his work:

Since I retired I have begun writing again—after all those years. I was an innocent of course. Not giving it a thought, presuming that I still lived in the time of Glover and The Caxton Press when modest editions of fiction were still economically possible. I feel rather like Rip van Winkle returned from a long nap in the Catskills. All has changed, has become more professional, as they say. Meaning commercial and hard-nosed It is still my hope that you will be interested enough to want to read MS

¹⁸ In his correspondence with these publishers Gilbert used the pseudonyms David Garvin and Dean Farran of "Dean Farran Printproductions" as representatives in advocating his work.

and then, if you are still interested perhaps promote it. It is a lot to ask. But I feel I have exhausted all the usual channels (as they say). [Letter dated 10-3-02, item 18, box 6, MB 957]

On the other hand, by this time he had taken matters into his own hands by enrolling in a bookbinding course at Christchurch Polytechnic which taught him to produce his own works in book-like form—the last resort, almost, of the frustrated writer. Two copies of "The Descent into Silence" were bound and dated 1984, the author's signature on each suggesting some finality to the project despite its considerable flaws, and the typos and spelling mistakes within rather taking away from the presumably desired effect of professional publication.

"Energy Island" (c.1980-84).

Some time early in his retirement period or possibly before, Gilbert had begun to write what turned out to be an enormous novel, full of characters, stories and plots, and located in an imaginary version of the South Island turned into nothing much more than a source of liquid fuels for the North. For this writing project Gilbert received a grant of \$2000 from the New Zealand Literary Fund in December 1982.¹⁹ His correspondence with the Literary Fund shows that after two and a half years he had completed the first three parts of this huge novel and used up his grant with photocopying and binding. A further request to the Literary Fund for assistance was declined.

"Energy Island" was Gilbert's biggest project ever, which he spent at least a decade working on, constantly expanding it and at one point editing a portion he published under a different title, *Acts of Terror and Delight*. The most nearly complete version of "Energy Island", before Gilbert decided to edit it down for publication, spans 839 pages and can be found in unbound manuscript version in the Macmillan Brown Archives.²⁰ In an abstract of the first part of "Energy Island" he has summarised the introduction as follows:

The reader is told not to expect the balanced form of a novel as this is a record of actual events reflecting the disorder of actuality. The account includes probes into the past of the [more] important characters. The reader is reminded that history is a branch of literature not a poor cousin of science (A. P. L. Taylor) [sic]. (Gilbert, "An abstract of Energy Island Part 1 Take-over", item 18, box 6, MB 957)

¹⁹ Cf. letter from Department of Internal Affairs dated 02-06-83, item 18, box 6, MB 957.

²⁰ Cf. items 33-59, boxes 8 and 9, MB 957.

"Energy Island" is another apocalyptic vision of a future New Zealand, one in which, this time, the country faces an economic crisis to do with the increasing global shortage of liquid fuels. Part One, entitled "Take-over", shows the government realising that it needs to address the issue, which it does by turning the South Island into the country's major production centre for liquid fuels, made out of biomass to be cultivated by South Islanders, who are faced by a growing unemployment. Dictatorial measures are taken which prohibit travel and emigration from South to North and generally control life in the South Island. The South Island Office (SIO) is responsible for the measures taken, the nature of which is described as being a "colonial approach". The North Island, through the prime minister, is well informed and supportive of the SIO action. The matter of high unemployment is taken care of by the South Island Plan which seeks to lower the standard of living in the South in order to minimise production costs, and involves everyone in labour. An official media agency, Newsouth, is introduced to feed South Islanders with only censored information to help their cause. Work is not forced upon the people, but a volunteer scheme, called Greenpower, to lure the masses, based on Nazi techniques, is introduced. Volunteers are hard to recruit despite Greenpower's best efforts; in fact, still more people find ways to flee north.

This first part of "Energy Island" also introduces most of the key characters of the novel: T. H. Thurston is the permanent head of Internal Affairs, who selects Michael Yaroslect as the head of the SIO. Lucy Abercrombie is Thurston's personal secretary. A former lover of hers, during her time at university, is Charles Cosgrove, on whose behalf she now acts as a spy on her employer. Ms Zoe Stavros is chief of SIO Operational Research Section, which aims to solve human problems in a rigorous and scientific manner. Sadie Wyandotte is introduced in the account of Zoe's time at university in the 1960s and is to reappear later, in part four, as an important player in the conspiracy that aims to achieve freedom.

Part two, entitled "Action and Counter", has the Prime Minister announce, again, severe travel restrictions from the South to the North Island. Student protests and other actions follow which are either ignored or dealt with by the SIO Special Group. A new scheme is introduced to find workers. Life for South Islanders becomes similar to that of peoples under former socialist dictatorships: restriction of personal freedom and the rationing of food and luxury items are imposed. Public dissent is not taken seriously, and one day the head of the SIO, Michael Yaroslect, is assassinated. A lengthy and unsuccessful investigation into the murder is carried out by Detective Chief Superintendent MacTintin. Zoe Stavros becomes the new

head of the SIO, which becomes independent of ministerial control, and is now only responsible to one person: the Marshall of the South, Lazlo Gineraria. Zoe Stavros, in her position as director of the SIO, aims to relax previous SIO measures, to make people more at ease with the new situation. She succeeds and life in the South Island is happier than under Yaroslect.

In part three, "Hegemony", Stavros re-investigates the Yaroslect assassination. This time the real assassin is revealed: Cynthia Stockridge, who was also a suspect under MacTintin, but had been dismissed as the source seemed unreliable. After giving an extensive family background of Stockridge, which goes back several centuries and explores several branches of the Stockridge family tree, reaching from Viking roots through royal English blood and Eastern connections to an Indian family branch, the focus is eventually moved back to Cynthia Stockridge and her upbringing and schooling. Cynthia's later connection to the radical activist Charles Cosgrove is eventually revealed. Cosgrove's radical ideas are somewhat obscure: something about the denial of the ape and the assertion of the human by a vast act of universal destruction. The focus swings back to Cynthia, her interrogation, which reveals that both she and Cosgrove had planned the assassination and Cynthia carried it out. The plot then moves to Zoe Stavros' official life, and her ways of making Yaroslect's original ideas for the South come true. New measures are introduced to deal with crime, such as exile for repeated crimes of violence, and a strong religious revival of the South is instigated.

In part four of "Energy Island", entitled "Overthrow", the established order is yet again disturbed. Stockridge, declared mentally unsound as convicted assassin, is sent to Dillwood Sanatorium, where she becomes a patient of Dr Araldus B. Flem, the medical superintendent of Dillwood Sanatorium. An interview with Flem, carried out many years later, discloses that Flem not only liked Stockridge, but, convinced of her sanity and superior endowment, became her follower, disciple and assistant in the advancements of her plans, of which the assassination had only been the beginning. Charles Cosgrove is also still involved, and at the centre of the conspiracy. After extensively exploring the family background and childhood years of Cosgrove, Zoe Stavros' former university friend Sadie Wyandotte re-emerges. She has been expelled from the USA, and, heavily involved in the conspiracy, buys a few hundred grams of Uranium 238 which is passed on to Max Bedient, an engineer who lives in Birdling's Flat near Christchurch, where he builds one or two bombs. The central government is presented with an ultimatum: if power over the South Island is not passed to the Freedom

League within a certain time limit, a nuclear device will be detonated and Christchurch destroyed. There is the added warning that the organisation possesses a second device. The SIO tries to uncover the organisation and, as a result, Christchurch is destroyed. Because of fear of the second device, power is instantly handed over and freedom of the South is announced. However, this freedom turns into violent lawlessness, anarchy and eventually renewed pressure from the government to maintain the liquid fuel production. It is then that the Cavalry of Christ, a religious group which had taken to the mountains years before, makes a sudden rush for the plains with the intent to introduce their religious order to the South Island.

This, roughly, is the main plot of "Energy Island", what strings the different parts together. But writing it down like this flatters Gilbert, since an actual reading of the novel is a much more confusing experience. His vivid imagination – and his light concentration - took him, and thus the story, on numerous and extensive diversions: most characters, however minor in their function, have their family background explored, often going back over centuries, and in great depth, with ancestor's names given as well as anecdotes of their lives and sexual preferences. One expects such diversions to amount to something; but in fact they lie there, static, adding no meaning to the story. To add further confusion, Gilbert also employs elements which have already baffled the reader of "Descent into Silence", such as the recurring theme of the Goddess Kali and other Indian religious influences as well as the chaos following nuclear destruction. Since he does not explain any of the religious events that take place, it is hard to judge whether they too are static, or whether they are meant to add to the meaning of the whole. They too just lie there.

In September 1980 Gilbert contacted Richards Publishing Consultants in Auckland enquiring whether they would be interested in representing him and his work. The reply by Ray Richards, dated 29-09-80, stressed that the publishing climate in New Zealand, especially for fiction, was not good, but that he was interested to see outlines of Gilbert's novels. Before Gilbert approached Richards again four years later, he sent some casual letters to Heinemann Publishers and Hodder & Stoughton stating his case and asking whether they might be interested in publishing his fiction, in what seems to have been an attempt to test the waters. Both replied encouraging him to send his manuscripts. Instead, Gilbert contacted Richards Publishing Consultants again, who eventually accepted the task of finding publishers for "Energy Island". However, Richards did not take to "Energy Island" straight away:

Our opinion of Part One . . . is difficult to condense or even to define. The manuscript has masterly qualities but the single part does not (we suggest) stand on its own, because of its inconclusive nature and because the major movements of the work are unclear (they doubtless develop in parts Two and Three). So your work may have to be considered only as a monumental whole and the problem there may be that its totality is too long and therefore too expensive for publication as commercial fiction. . . . You have been prodigal in your exploration of your characters and these loops within the storyline are so unusual as to be found engaging; or their diversity may turn the "reader for entertainment" right off. (letter to Gilbert dated 18-09-84, item 18, box 6, MB 957)

While Gilbert was pleased that Richards had agreed to find publication for his work, he was somewhat taken aback by Richard's comments on the literary quality of the work:

I would be agreeable to discussing any suggested changes which might lead to successful publication. This does not mean that I would countenance any editing but it does mean that I have a flexible attitude and realise that a novel is not a sonnet—there [sic] is always much that may be altered or omitted within the compass of 385000 words. To be more explicit. Publication could be in 1, 2, 3, or 4 parts. There must be better places to make the division into parts. The parts could be published together as were the three parts of The Lord of the Rings or was done with the Victorian three-deckers. . . . The loops in the narrative (as you so feicitiously [sic] call them) could, perhaps, in some cases be omitted or shortened but great care would be necessary for in most cases these apparent diversions are not extraneous to the narrative but explanatory of later action and character. (letter to Richards dated 11-10-84, item 18, box 6, MB 957)

The first publisher Richards approached on behalf of Gilbert was William Collins Ltd in Auckland (cf. letter dated 09-11-84). As Collins seemed to be hesitant Gilbert suggested to Richards to use a pseudonym, David Garvin, to avoid probing into the matter of his not having published for such a long time (cf. letter dated 14-12-84). Gilbert's eagerness to be published, and the fact that he did not necessarily expect to become rich in the process – his desperation, in other words - become obvious in a letter to Richards:

I am at present engaged in preparing my various Income Tax returns and find that in respect to the new geriatric super-tax I am so situated that any increase in my income would in the main be payable to the tax-man. This being the case I am very easy about any increases in my income. . . . I therefore advance this proposition. If it would assist I am willinf [sic] to forgo all royalties on any of my books published until the publisher has recovered his costs. When I refer to royalties I mean the net amount, that is, less your commission. (letter to Richards dated 19-03-85, item 18, box 6, MB 957)

Three days after sending this letter to Richards, Gilbert received a reply informing him of Collins' rejection and Richards' intention to try McIndoe and Allen & Unwin next (cf. letter dated 22-03-85). However, there is no evidence of his doing so; instead, Richards approached

Hamish Hamilton Ltd in London (cf. letter dated 12-04-85), who agreed to read a volume of "Energy Island". But yet again Gilbert had to accept the rejection of his work:

I've had a look at the G. R. Gilbert volume you sent me and I'm sorry to say I really can't come to grips with it. It just isn't my sort of thing and, since it's such a major project, I'm sure I should say no so that you can start talking to publishers who can respond more enthusiastically to it. (Letter from Hamish Hamilton Ltd to Richards dated 02-05-85, item 18, box 6, MB 957)

Approaches to Cenury Hutchinson, Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape were also reported as unsuccessful by Richards, who began to set out a new strategy: "we have to accept that you have essayed a long and "uncommercial" quartet in Energy Island and that the manageable length of Descent into Silence is the best new approach" (item 18, box 6, MB 957).

At about this point Gilbert was pleased to be approached by Simon Garrett, co-editor (with Shona Smith) of the new Christchurch literary journal *Untold*, who had heard rumours that Gilbert had a large unpublished novel. In due course Garrett published 9 pages from "Energy Island" (*Untold*, Spring 1985, 49-58), causing a minor stir for a while and having the desired effect of drawing literary attention back to Gilbert.²¹ Some were reminded and some informed of his existence, and some began to speculate whether he was another Ronald Hugh Morrieson, a forgotten genius who had been sitting on unpublished literary masterpieces. There was speculation, too, whether the nine published pages in *Untold* might in fact be *all* that existed of the work and that they were a part of an elaborate literary hoax, New Zealand's equivalent of the celebrated "Ern Malley" hoax in Australia, where a bogus poet had been invented by real ones.²²

²¹ This extract was taken from part four of the novel, entitled "Overthrow".

²² This information was recollected by Patrick Evans, who was connected with *Untold* in the mid-1980s, in a conversation with me on 8 April 2002.

Chapter 4

Gilbert Self-published

In response to Richards's letter advising a change in publishing strategy for "Energy Island", Gilbert informed him that while he wished him to pursue publication of "Descent into Silence", he intended to take publication of other works into his own hands through what he described as "a fledgling firm owned and operated by [himself] to take over the odds and sods otherwise unpublishable of [his] output. . . . Most of it will not be at all commercially viable" (16-10-85; item 18, box 6, MB 957). By the time he wrote his next letter (15-01-86), he had decided to retrieve all manuscripts from Richards, including "Descent into Silence", and not pursue publication through proper publishing houses any further. From this point on, all of Gilbert's works that were published he published himself, putting together handbound copies made to order via P. O. Box 16288 Hornby. To complete the effect he invented a pseudonymous publishing company, "Dean Farran Printproductions" referring to no particular historical figure: he made the books alone in the workroom behind his Lincoln house. These publications can be found in the National Bibliographic Database and are held in various libraries throughout New Zealand, including the Macmillan Brown Library. In effect he invented an imaginary publishing house whose purpose was to publish his own work and only his own work, under various different pseudonyms—a sort of vanity-of-vanities press.

This step marks a change in his attitude towards writing and publishing that can be detected in his work after the failure of "Descent into Silence" and the fading of his intention to return to acknowledged and public authorship. What he wrote subsequently, and imprinted with the Dean Farran Printproductions name, became increasingly private, part of a game which he controlled in what we assume was some kind of compensation for his sense of obscurity and neglect. For about the last ten years of his life he created a number of imaginary authors and their works as well as various imaginary critics and the criticism they wrote, giving the effect, to himself at least, of a thriving literary industry to one side of the established one.

The Dramatis Personae of Gilbert's Novel Entitled Energy Island (1986, 1990).

The feeling that Gilbert was creating a hoax around "Energy Island", a structure of publications around an empty centre, was increased by the appearance of this volume. It was

published under the pseudonym "Sary Hooptide", the "author" who provides the book's 14-page introduction, which, like the whole work, is designed to draw attention to Gilbert and the unpublished "Energy Island". "Hooptide" does this by creating a myth around both author and product, raising the question whether in fact Gilbert is still alive or just "a media make-up" (5). "Hooptide" further raises the question whether "such a considerable exercise in creativity (500,000 words, over 130 characters) [could] have been the unaided work of a 68-year-old National Superannuitant" (5), and wonders whether the novel was "written by a committee or a computer" (6).

However, in the middle of the humorous account of "Energy Island" and its author there are some more serious themes, moments when it is hard not to feel that Gilbert is "speaking" in his own voice. For instance, when "Hooptide" talks about publishers who have acquired a "reputation for losing or ignoring the masterpieces entrusted to them" (8), it is tempting to take this as a personal remark, considering Gilbert's recent history of unsuccessful encounters with publishers. His most serious remarks, however, can be found in the second edition of *The Dramatis Personae*, which he produced in 1990. This second edition was provided with an additional introduction of two pages, in which it is stated that "the writer would like to take advantage . . . to comment briefly on the lack of notice which greeted the first impression" (13). "Hooptide" complains that although review copies were sent to a large number of magazines, he has received no acknowledgement at all, not even an acknowledgement in a "listing among publications received" (14). Just how frustrating this wall of silence must have been for Gilbert becomes clear in his final comment that "to be quite disregarded may, in some cases deal a mortal blow to the nascent creative urge" (14). "Hooptide" here has fallen away, the early game has dissolved, and it is Gilbert himself who makes evident after so many years of neglect how deeply he felt that his writing had not received the attention and acknowledgement he craved. This alone accounts for the darker, more misanthropic and pessimistic strain that becomes evident in his later writing as a counterpart to the lighter game-playing with mask and pastiche.

Poems by Evan Woodspear. Recently unearthed. (1985).

This small booklet of 64 softbound pages (the interior title pages use the title "A Voice From the Dead") was the first publication by Dean Farran Printproductions. The 6-page preface, signed by Gilbert himself, explains in detail who "Evan Woodspear" is ("one of those who

perished in the Second World War while flying over the Pacific Ocean", [1]) and how his manuscripts came to be found ("in an old shoe-box on the high shelf of a deep built-in wardrobe in an old square house" being demolished by "Russ Conway", a local builder; [1]). The preface also explains who "Carelton Brizel" (or "Carelton" on p. 3) is: a local critic now living in Europe but equipped for the task of commenting on the poems of "Woodspear", apparently, through their shared West Coast birthplace. The invention of this fictional persona, it turns out, seems to free Gilbert a little to write about himself in the third person and thereby reveal information about himself he might not otherwise have been able to give quite so freely, although none of it is particularly sensitive. The subsequent pages, 7-24, are taken up with "Carelton's" essay on the late poet, a mixture of memoir (he mentions a sister, "Saralil", who turns up again in the introduction to Gilbert's own reissue of *Free to Laugh and Dance* in 1982, which is also, as we will see below, supposedly provided by "Carelton") and critical commentary.

Here, speaking in a slightly different voice from the one we usually associate with Gilbert, "Carelton" is able to give full expression to a vision of society which increasingly seems to have been his creator's own:

A new brutality rules the arts and minds of people everywhere The standards of the dandipratt are in the ascendant. One does not refer here to stature for many of these latter-day post-war persons are of surprising physical proportions, well-fed and well-fleshed, ruddy with health and roughage, joggers, jiggers, and jivers to a man or woman. No, no. The homuncular qualities discerned lie deep, disguised by youth and beauty. The dwarfs inhabit the interior of today's beautiful people Might it even be hazarded that this is the generation of people referred to by the poet? Within their healthy shapely flesh dwarfish pretensions rattle around, clamber about, look for easy ways out, mock nature, reducing the human to the ape. (12)

The values are Gilbert's, as similar fulminations in some of his subsequent publications show, but the voice is that of an evolved persona, an invented character a little "adjacent" to the author himself. This was useful for letting off authorial steam, but apart from this it is difficult to decide whether Gilbert was simply amusing himself or trying to set up something more ambitious, a complex web of illusory interactions of which only he had full knowledge and control. The long passage by "Carelton Brizel" on the authenticity of the poems by "Woodspear" suggests the latter:

On the basis of such an account it would be almost a pure act of faith to accept authorship as established. However, I can agree that the possibility of either of Evan Woodspear's parents having written the work is so unlikely that it must be altogether

rejected. Thus, if the chain of events extending from the foreman's discovery to Gilbert sending me the papers could be independently established then it would seem likely that Woodspear was the originator. However, the foreman can no longer be traced, nor can Conway who moved to Australia over ten years ago. This leaves Gilbert as just about the sole source of information. There seems to be no reason why he should now go to the trouble of fabrication and risk consequent exposure, and he has not over the years inclined (to my knowledge) to the counterfeiting of literature. He would, I am sure, far rather publish under his own name and hope to advance his reputation. (18)

"Brizel" continues this rather laborious speculation a couple of pages later:

It may be the only work touched by the spirit of the Modern ever written in the colony or it may be a rather elaborate (and talented) pastiche. But a convincing reason for carrying out such a hoax seems hard to come by. No one stands to gain and the work shows considerable care and effort in its composition. (20)

Generally, Gilbert's purpose and tone seem to waver in this long essay, between attempts to produce a plausible pastiche of what he perceived current literary critical practice to be, and invented poetry titles ("A Fecal Matter", "The Buggery Blues") so puerile as to give the game away to anyone who might still be taken in by the essay. Of interest, though, given the European setting of his odd wartime novella *Glass-Sharp and Poisonous*, is his connexion of "Woodspear's" verse with European modernism rather than with local developments, although his critical method is third-rate, particularly when he rails against what he calls the "post-Modern" (16).

For any attempt to hoax the market to be successful - if this is indeed what was intended - the poems of "Woodspear" which "Brizel" is introducing obviously needed to be convincing. Rather than reading like attempts to create an evolved and convincing *corpus*, though, they seem more like the verbal doodlings of someone whose major commitment was always going to be to prose. One or two are not-unamusing squibs - "Where the flea sucks/ There suck I/ On my lady's upper thigh" ("The Food of Love", 35) is pure Glover - but others are pretty poor. The following ("His Will Be Done") is representative of 'Woodspear's' *oeuvre*:

The maggot in the rotting meat
The fevered mosquito sucking blood
Were by Thy Maker made.

The tiny flea upon your thigh
The crab crouched on your pubes

Are not by God gainsaid.

Remark the slug upon the rose
The gilded butterfly stretched on the web
Thus He suffers His work to be arrayed.

The monsoon's foaming flood, the *hurricane's* roar
The earthquake's shuddering slide –
These are but games He played.

'Tis evil makes the world go round
So do not ever in bad weather
Pray for the sunshine of his smile
Or hope to feel His favour.

The uneasy mixture of free verse and something intermittently more formal, with its uncertain metricality, tone and (particularly) diction, is a hallmark of "Woodspear's" slender output. So too is the rather unpleasant emphasis, already evident in the selections I have made, on rotting and decay, too often connected with female sexuality. This is particularly evident in "Found Drowned #1" and "Found Drowned #2", which, with "Miss Patrick's Last Ride", set out a rather morbid fascination with drowned women discovered well into the process of their putrefaction. The rather formal and archaic diction of these pieces suggests that they were meant to be taken seriously as pastiches at least, but the mounting effect is of a prose writer out of his depth in the business of making poetic fakes, and of a man with a lot of time on his hands.

***Best Beakerful* (1986)**

The next handbound book to appear from Dean Farran Printproductions was *Best Beakerful. A Premier Selection of Poesy Culled from the Beaker Quarterly and Other Leading Journals*. Despite the fact that his name does not occur in the publication, and for all the attempt he makes to "create" an imaginary literary journal and imply that it is connected with the existing literary scene, it is obvious that the writers in this volume, their introductions and their poems are all invented by Gilbert himself. This is evident in the description of the work in the National Bibliographic Database entry: "Collection of humorous biographies, stories and

poems by fictitious New Zealand authors",²³ and also in the tone of his reply to the letter from John McIndoe Ltd rejecting "Descent into Silence", with which Gilbert sent a complimentary copy of *Best Beakerful*:

as a small token of appreciation . . . an anthology aimed at the business community who, the Beaker people are convinced, are now ready to take solace or find inspiration in suitable slanted evocations of the Muse. The Beaker, a rather fugitive quarterly, with its curious motto, Dip Deep and Bring Up the Coin of Commerce, may be know to you. (Letter to John McIndoe Ltd dated 22-12-86, item 15, box 5, MB 957)

The chief curiosity of this work is its response to the economic climate of the times, particularly what came to be known during the first term of the fourth Labour government (1994-7) as "Rogernomics". A two-page preface states that the volume responds to a market survey which has shown "a quite remarkable poetic resurgence" among the "financial élite" of New Zealand:

There is a clear need, it seems, for a volume of verse suitable for the director's desk. One, which while keeping right up to date, provides a source of quotable quotes for memos and reports and boardroom exchanges, lines to be relished in those quiet periods between take-overs, or which may offer comfort in those dark hours of anguish at being passed over, or which may even somewhat assuage the pangs of undeserved redundancy. (5)

A single-page editor's note explains that each subsequent individual author's entry will be preceded by a brief autobiographical note, since knowledge of a poet's life always helps us to appreciate their poetry better. For example, "it is helpful to be aware", he states, that "Charles Brasch once repulsed the advances of Robin Hyde" (7).

It is clear that these notes, along with the preface, are what really interest Gilbert; his "contributors'" poems bears a remarkable similarity to one another, being either in rather loose free verse or prose-poetry. There are "Alison Alfort", a junior stock exchange executive whose "muse is definitely mercantile" (8), "Seraphina Dallis", who "presently supervises the busy executive women's room on the eighth level of the recently completed Surrey Building in downtown New Plymouth" and whose "thing" is "[a]ctuality . . . [t]he real" (20), "Sam Lessing", whose most successful volume is called *Preaching in the Marketplace* (37), "Ulysses Thermodin", a "senior auditor with Wilson Hills & Bent" (82), and "Frank Weller", whose poetry is produced by the anoxia he suffers from on the twentyfourth floor of the

²³ Source: Te Puna [National Bibliographic Database]

Willis Street building he works in. Amongst these are other imaginary poets from outside the business world (he seems concerned in particular to stress their amateurism) who represent what are emerging by this time as Gilbert's usual targets – the kinds of people who in the period in which he was writing this material were in fact busy taking literary power over from men of his generation, namely women, feminists and Polynesians. *Best Beakerful* is largely sub-Glover and the sort of mildly diverting entertainment that in the latter's heyday at Caxton would probably have been properly published in not-dissimilar form, though with a more professional appearance. As it is, it seems like a ghost from the past.

Free to Laugh and Dance (1987).

In the middle of producing the fake publications that were coming out of Dean Farran Printproductions during his retirement, Gilbert paused to bring out his own reissue of his 1942 Caxton short story collection. The desire to invent is not entirely absent, however, as he precedes this version with a fake introduction, another effort from the ubiquitous "Carelton Brizel" and one which enables him to draw his own genuine earlier publication into the fantasies of his later years. "Brizel's" comment that "this seems to be a season of exhumation" (vii) is part of Gilbert's pessimistic retrospective assessment of his career: "Was my friend quite dead (in the literary sense)? Maybe not" (vii); Gilbert's disappointment about his unsuccessful literary career is expressed quite clearly when he says that the stories had "died ... long before of neglect" (viii). A few pages later he accuses the "main body of New Zealand fictioneers" of having "marched stolidly over his remains and trod him into the dun-coloured landscape that they have made their own [sic]" (xvi). The misanthropic contempt for the contemporary world expressed in the introduction to *Poems by Evan Woodspear* continues in his observation of "change and decay" (xvii).

In this introduction, crucially, possibly speaking with more freedom through his persona, Gilbert rejects the notion that he was a literary "son" of Sargeson. Instead, he claims that right from "the start he had never been one of them [i.e. Sargeson's early post-war acolytes] and his implicit repudiation of the Saroyanesque for what some regarded as the meaningless was of no help at all" (xvi). He suggests a number of reasons why his literary career had not flourished, for instance, that he had moved out of the mainstream and onto a coastal island, and later to Arrowtown, and thus away from the literary scene, a tendency continued when he joined the Air Force.

Acts of Terror and Delight. Book One. Winners May Weep. (1992).

This is the only publication by Dean Farran Printproductions that bears Gilbert's real name as author, suggesting perhaps some kind of wistful commitment to the project. It is the heavily edited first part of the monstrous "Energy Island", together with some of the second part, all rewritten as a futuristic novel in which, once more, the North Island is turned into the cultural centre of New Zealand while the South Island is reduced to the function of producing and supplying liquid fuels in an attempt to make the country self-sufficient in energy. Where "Energy Island" covered a huge span of time and space, ranging from Normandy in the tenth century to New Zealand in the present, Book 1 of *Acts of Terror and Delight* offers a more condensed version. This greater focus and its lesser length make it easier to follow than "Energy Island", but only relatively so as he still supplies a large enough number of characters and sufficient plot contortions to make for reading difficulties. There is no sense of advance, of refinement.

The characters are largely identical to the ones in "Energy Island", except that Zoe Stavros has been edited out. Whereas the attack on SIO director Michael Yaroslect is not carried out until part two of "Energy Island" it becomes the opening scene of *Acts of Terror and Delight*, and the investigation by MacTintin follows, along with an account of the general situation of the country and how the assassination came about. The plot remains similar to the "Energy Island" version: the investigation is handed over to another detective, who arrests the wrong person because MacTintin does not provide a scapegoat fast enough; the economic crisis and measures taken to solve it are the same as in "Energy Island". Small details are changed, such as the name of the Permanent Head of the Internal Affairs Department, who is now (inexplicably) T. D. Thurston rather than T. H. Thurston: where in "Energy Island" his life was not greatly explored, in this version he has 3000 words devoted to him – a typical example of Gilbert's tendency to expand whilst supposedly editing. He then explains who Yaroslect was and why he was chosen as head of the SIO; Lucy Abercrombie spies on Yaroslect and passes on information to Charles Cosgrove, an extreme freedom freak; in a part that spans 13,000 words Gilbert elaborates on the story of Lucy's aunt who has been identified by an old Kashmiri swami as being chosen by the Goddess Kali and how they achieve moksha, some sexual ritual, in (where else?) a Christchurch house. The aunt then goes to India where she opens an ashram, which is joined by Lucy at a later stage.

It is this kind of lengthy diversion to the actual plot that makes the book hard to read, as these diversions, similar to the ones in "Energy Island" do not seem to serve a purpose to furthering story or theme. After the assassination of Yaroslect Lucy is haunted by feelings of guilt for her betrayal, and as a consequence becomes sexually involved with Thurston in order to relieve her guilty conscience. Gilbert describes in about 4,000 words what power-enhancing effects this affair has on Thurston. The focus is then shifted for the next 7,000 words to Lazlo Ginareria, a supermarket tycoon, who becomes the first Marshal of the South. A huge official ceremony takes place, which costs millions of dollars and sees important officials from Pacific countries as witnesses to the occasion. The book closes with an attempted hindsight account of the events by T. D. Thurston, who – to the relief of the reader, surely - proves not to be open to sharing his memories for public purposes.

By the Light of the Moon (1992).

This publication bears the authorial pseudonym "Eidel Rasmuss", a name derived from Joy Gilbert's maiden name, Rasmussen, and giving another persona behind which the increasingly dyspeptic Gilbert could conceal himself as he gave vent to his negative views of the society around him in a collection of some forty stories and fragments. His cover depicts the devil walking the earth at night, interacting with mankind on a rather personal level—in this instance, talking to a farmer in a field. The image bears some resemblance to the "little black man" in *Glass-Sharp and Poisonous*, the darkness that prevailed there being evident in "Rasmuss's" title as well, suggesting that society has still not yet found its way out of darkness and delusion.

Every story in *By the Light of the Moon* focuses on and exposes one or other element of society's deterioration. All result from a loss of empathy for fellow humans and a lack of love and morality. The first story is about a 26-year-old woman called Rosie Spice who has indulged in promiscuous sex since the age of fourteen. She keeps a record of all the men she has slept with, drives a BMW and loves herself alone. It describes her one-night stand with a man who decides that he's "not gay tonight" (2) and how Rosie wonders for the first time in her life about the dangers of casual sex:

Driven by some fierce need-to-know, to see, at least to glimpse, she stared closely at the reflection of her parts in the mirror, sitting legs pulled apart. She noted no significant change. But up there, out of sight and spreading like the hair roots of a willow, were the tendrils of some strange life. (Rasmuss 5)

Even though Gilbert does not mention AIDS explicitly, he gives a number of obvious hints, which at the time were thought to be the main risk group, such as the fact that the man Rosie slept with usually has homosexual relationships and that she had permitted him to sodomise her, leaving her to wonder, "What little lesions had there been?" (4). The story has a strongly puritanical sense that AIDS is a punishment for sexually immoral—or amoral—behaviour.

"A Safety Aid" is a story that aims to satirise society's dark side. It is an advertisement for sex dolls. Gilbert, by ridiculing society's need for such apparatuses, points out that "self-love is more and more encouraged these days" (22) and that relationships with real partners are out of date, since other human beings have become mere "objects of distrust and incomprehension" (22). Gilbert further reveals people's perversions by stressing that in today's age people do not just want a male or female doll, but need specialities to please their particular fantasies. Thus, the dolls on offer vary from "pre-school chubbies, school-girls . . . , post-adolescents, mature women, geriatrics" to "cadavers (use cold water)" (21). This story demonstrates Gilbert's belief that society has become dysfunctional, a place where partners are substituted by artificial devices.

There are other stories which stress the individual's inability to develop relationships, and for some reason homosexuality features in quite a few of these. For instance, "On How to Die" is about two men sitting at a table arguing, the younger saying that unless the older leaves his wife, he will leave town; when the older man refuses the younger man gets up to leave, and when he does this the older man shoots him. Here the homosexual theme is implicit, but in "The Last Heterosexual" it is overt, describing the isolation of the last heterosexual in a society which has been taken over by homosexuals. The local radio station is called FM-99GAY, the "hets" (as the heterosexuals are called) lead a ghetto-like existence with their own, segregated stretch of beach, separate entrances to shops, and even their own street ("Straight Lane, it was called"; 12). Lonely because of the discrimination he experiences from the homosexuals around him, the last "het" decides to "show them he could fight back" (13), which he does, strangely, by drowning himself in the sea. A further story, "Better Burnt than Molested", moves from homosexuality to paedophilia, with a protagonist who watches a young girl drown rather than saving her, for fear that if he tries to save her he will be charged with attempted rape. "Duty or Indulgence?" moves beyond paedophilia to something else, with an account of a man who has sex with a severely mentally handicapped woman.

All these stories are primarily concerned with the extreme outer limits of human sexual preferences, and especially with the lack of human empathy that Gilbert sees as attached to such extremes. The perspective is unsophisticated, homosexuality being associated with paedophilia, rape and the sexual exploitation of the handicapped as some kind of perversion. Such an extreme puritan view, while not inconsistent with the society around him, contrasts with the gusto with which sexual acts such as copulation and masturbation are described in these late stories and also with the opinion Gilbert expressed about censorship in his autobiography, where we remember him recounting the story of his illicit importing of prohibited material for under-the-counter sales while he was working in the Customs Department in Westport (Gilbert, "A Reading Writing Man" 124-131). It also goes against his defence of Sargeson in the 1600-word article he wrote after a *Listener* review of Denys Trussell's autobiography of the poet A. R. D. Fairburn, which he claimed portrayed his dead friend as a "vicious pervert" and a "dirty old man" (Gilbert, "The Good Friend" 1). Elsewhere in "A Reading Writing Man" he shows more consistently puritanical attitudes, for example saying, when talking of Dr Marie Stopes's *Married Love*, that the book "would not open any eyes today when babies are born clasping copies of the rules for safe sex, as copulation is now called" (129) and that books are "dangerous in some hands, when scanned by some eyes, some books might have an explosive property which could kindle unhealthy even unclean even dangerous thoughts" (124). There is a deal of confusion evident, in other words, between, on the one hand, the autobiography (and, as well, as the kind of things which "Carelton Brizel" had to say) and, on the other, the fiction, and between differing sets of values from story to story in *By the Light of the Moon*, and even within particular stories in that volume.

Conclusion

Looking at the work of Gilbert's "second career", the fourteen years between retirement and death, it is difficult not to see the confusion I noted at the end of the foregoing chapter as part of a larger tendency to ambiguity and ambivalence that represents a lack of literary self-knowledge and a failure to resolve crucial issues in Gilbert's own mind. His various works are in different styles and voices and bear different pseudonyms—including, we have to assume, the pseudonym "G. R. Gilbert", since it is impossible to pin down his writing position to one particular area, to say that he was writing more authentically as "himself" when using his own name than he was when writing as "Carelton Brizel" or "Sary Hooptide". The genres vary, too, from short fiction to novels through autobiography to what, in "Energy Island", is in effect a giant single-volume *roman fleuve*, as if he had difficulty making up his mind which path he wanted to pursue, how far to go down it, and how to make his way once there. The torrent of characters, plots and subplots in his longer fiction suggests an excess of creativity, but the size of some of the works and the lack of overall control, purpose and direction indicate a lack of the kind of discipline and self-denial which are required for a work to be more than simply an expression of a writer's interests, fancies and obsessions. It is here that he most obviously fails.

The final judgement of Gilbert is probably his own, the one presented by the title which he gave to his autobiography. He was "a reading writing man", someone who because of the accidents of his birth learned to value literature and who was excited by the idea of being publicly recognised as a writer, as we saw in his ecstatic reaction to his first publication. His good fortune was to coincide with the prose movement that centred, briefly as it turned out, around Sargeson and the publishing phenomenon, equally brief, that was caused by the rise of the Caxton Press between 1936 and 1941, and particularly to coincide with their need to find new young prose writers to balance the relatively large amount of poetry that was being produced from the Press at the time. His misfortune was, at its simplest, to deviate from his mentor's example by getting married and having children whom he had to support by doing jobs which prevented him from being able to write for the duration of the time in which his kind of writing and thinking might conceivably have found a market. When he did return to the local writing scene it was in the early stages, as I have indicated, of making the kind of changes which have subsequently caused all the writers of his generation to look a little old-

fashioned and irrelevant. There is a world of difference, after all, between "Energy Island" and Keri Hulme's *the bone people*, even though they were written at roughly the same time.

But that difference is a difference of quality as much as anything else, and there are in fact significant ways in which the two novels can be connected, something which at this penultimate moment is important to stress as a counter to all the negatives which inevitably accompany any reasonably lengthy study of Gilbert's work as this has been. For Hulme's is nothing if not a South Island novel and, particularly, a West Coast novel, a work aware of the regionality of its provenance and one which asserts aspects of that regionality as an alternative to an encroaching world civilisation that is seen to have gone badly wrong. As I noted in Chapter 3 above, Gilbert's "The Descent Into Silence" resembled other New Zealand works of fiction of the period which were making the same statement at much the same time; in Chapter 4 we saw how that interest, written in slightly different ways, seen less as a threat from the Northern hemisphere in "Energy Island" and *Acts of Terror and Delight* than as a threat from the North Island, persisted in his later writing and marked it as the emotional and thematic centre of what he was attempting, however clumsily, to write. In this emphasis Gilbert's clumsy senilia has its significance as the submerged part of a quite distinct South Island tradition of a particular period, one whose nodes are located in the south and the west and which begins perhaps with Bill Pearson's *Coal Flat* (1963) and moves through writers like Peter Hooper, Keri Hulme, Brian Turner, Philip Temple and even Janet Frame. Almost unreadable in itself, full of pathos towards its end, Gilbert's project nonetheless has its importance as a verification of what is better, a proof of the currency of the themes which interested a number of writers during the last twentyfive years of his life and also of a capacity for discrimination in the local publishing scene, an ability to make more than rudimentary judgments of quality. He is the shadow who proves that the figures in the foreground indeed have substance.

It is easy to sympathise with Gilbert's plight in his last years as he came to contemplate his failure and the simple fact that what he wrote was not what anyone else wished to read. In the end he himself was his last remaining reader, bringing a sad new meaning to the title of the first part of his autobiography as he presided over a tiny world in which even his hoaxes and his attempts to mythicise himself, to attract a new kind of attention by making himself a mystery, lacked consistency and sustained effort and in the end, self-belief. His predicament enables us to read *Descent into Silence* as something of a parable, with its ageing protagonist

who is among the last survivors of a nuclear blast and who passes on his skills to a young apprentice. It would seem that the only difficulty with this interpretation is the lack of a young apprentice, but in fact the existence of this thesis and the interest which has caused me to collect and house his work, and then write about it as I have, it disproves that. Where the interpretation really falls down, it has to be said, is in Gilbert's relative lack of skills.

Bibliography

- Brandt, Jasmin. "Interview with Joy Gilbert; Lincoln, 9 July 1999". Unpaginated. In the possession of the author.
- Brasch, Charles. *The Estate and Other Poems*. Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1957.
- Chapman, Robert. "Fiction and the Social Pattern". *Landfall*. 7.1. (March 1953): 26-58.
- Curnow, Allen (ed.). *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse: Selected with an Introduction and Notes by Allen Curnow*. London: Unwin Brothers Ltd., 1960.
- - -, *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings 1935-1984*. Ed. Peter Simpson. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1987.
- Ermarth, Elizabeth Deeds. "Realism and the English Novel". *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*. Eds. Martin Coyle, Peter Garside et al. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1991. 565-575.
- Douglas, Auriel and Michael Strumpf. *Webster's New World Dictionary of Quotations*. New York: Macmillan, 1998.
- Evans, Patrick. "The Provincial Dilemma, 1. After the God Boy". *Landfall*. 30.1 (March 1976): 25-36.
- - -, "The Provincial Dilemma, 2. The Bit In Between". *Landfall*. 30.3 (September 1976): 246-258.
- - -, "The Provincial Dilemma, 3. New Zealand as Vietnam in Fiction". *Landfall*. 31.1 (March 1977): 9-22.
- - -. *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature*. Auckland: Penguin, 1990.
- - -, "The Future of the Past: Making History out of New Zealand Literature". *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*. Berlin: Langenscheidt, 1994: 122-130.
- Gibbons, Peter J. "The Climate of Opinion". *The Oxford History of New Zealand*. Ed. Geoffrey W. Rice. 2nd ed. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1995. 308-336.

Gilbert, Garvin Robert. *Free to Laugh and Dance*. Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1942.

---, *Glass-sharp and Poisonous*. Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1952.

---, (ed.) *A Voice From the Dead. Poems by Evan Woodspear*. Christchurch: Dean Farran Printproductions, 1985.

---, *Best Beakerful. A Premier Selection of Poesy Culled From THE BEAKER QUARTERLY and Other Leading Journals*. Christchurch: Dean Farran Printproductions, 1986.

---, *Free to Laugh and Dance*. Christchurch: Dean Farran Printproductions, 1987 [reprint with added introduction].

Hooptide, Sary. *The Dramatis Personae of Gilbert's Novel Entitled "Energy Island"*. Christchurch: Dean Farran Printproductions, 1986.

---, *The Dramatis Personae of Gilbert's Novel Entitled "Energy Island"*. Christchurch: Dean Farran Printproductions, 1990.

Jones, Lawrence. *Barbed Wire and Mirrors. Essays on New Zealand Prose*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1987.

---, "The Provincial Period, 1935-1964". *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*. Ed. Terry Sturm. Rev. ed. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998a. 150-178.

---, "The Man Alone". *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998b. 331f.

King, Michael. *Frank Sargeson: A Life*. Auckland: Penguin, 1995.

McIntyre, W. David. "Imperialism and Nationalism". *The Oxford History of New Zealand*. Ed. Geoffrey W. Rice. 2nd ed. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1995. 337-347

Moffat, Kirstine E. *The Puritan Paradox: The Puritan Legacy in the Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life of New Zealand, Focusing Primarily on the Works of Novelists Writing*

- Between 1862 and 1940*. PhD Thesis in English, Victoria University of Wellington, 1999.
- New, W. H. *Dreams of Speech and Violence: The Art of the Short Story in Canada and New Zealand*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987.
- Newton, John. "The South Island Myth: a Short History." *Australian Canadian Studies: a Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. 18.1-2 (2000): 23-39.
- Paul, Blackwood. "Glass-sharp and Poisonous. G.R. Gilbert. The Caxton Press. 15s." *Landfall*. 23 (Sept 1952): 247-248.
- Pearson, Bill. "Fretful Sleepers". *Fretful Sleepers and other Essays*. Auckland: Heinemann, 1974. 1-32.
- Rasmuss, Eidel. *By the Light of the Moon*. Christchurch: Dean Farran Printproductions, 1992.
- Sargeson, Frank. *Conversation in a Train. And Other Critical Writing*. [Selected and edited by Kevin Cunningham]. Auckland: Auckland University Press and Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Simpson, Peter. A. "Beyond the Provincial". *Ronald Hugh Morrieson*. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1982. 54-61.
- Smithyman, Kendrick. *A Way of Saying: a Study of New Zealand Poetry*. Auckland/London: Collins, 1965.
- Tate, Allen. "The New Provincialism: With an Epilogue on the Southern Novel 1945". *Essays of Four Decades*. Chicago: Swallow Press, 1959. 282-293.
- Wevers, Lydia. "Nationalism and Social Realism, 1920s-1950s". *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*. Ed. Terry Sturm. Rev.ed. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998. 263-282
- Williams, Mark. "Nationalism and Modernism, 1933-1970s". *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*. Ed. Terry Sturm. Rev. ed. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998. 707-722.

Unpublished works

Gilbert, Garvin Robert. "The Descent Into Silence". Novel, ca. 1984.

- - -, "A Reading Writing Man". Autobiography, part 1. 1980s. B

- - -, "Reading, Writing and Revolution". Autobiography, part 2, 120 pages, ca. 1993.
MB 957, box 4, item 11.

- - -, "I remember, I remember". Essay. 1982. Appendix.

- - -, "The Good Friend". Essay. 1984. Appendix.